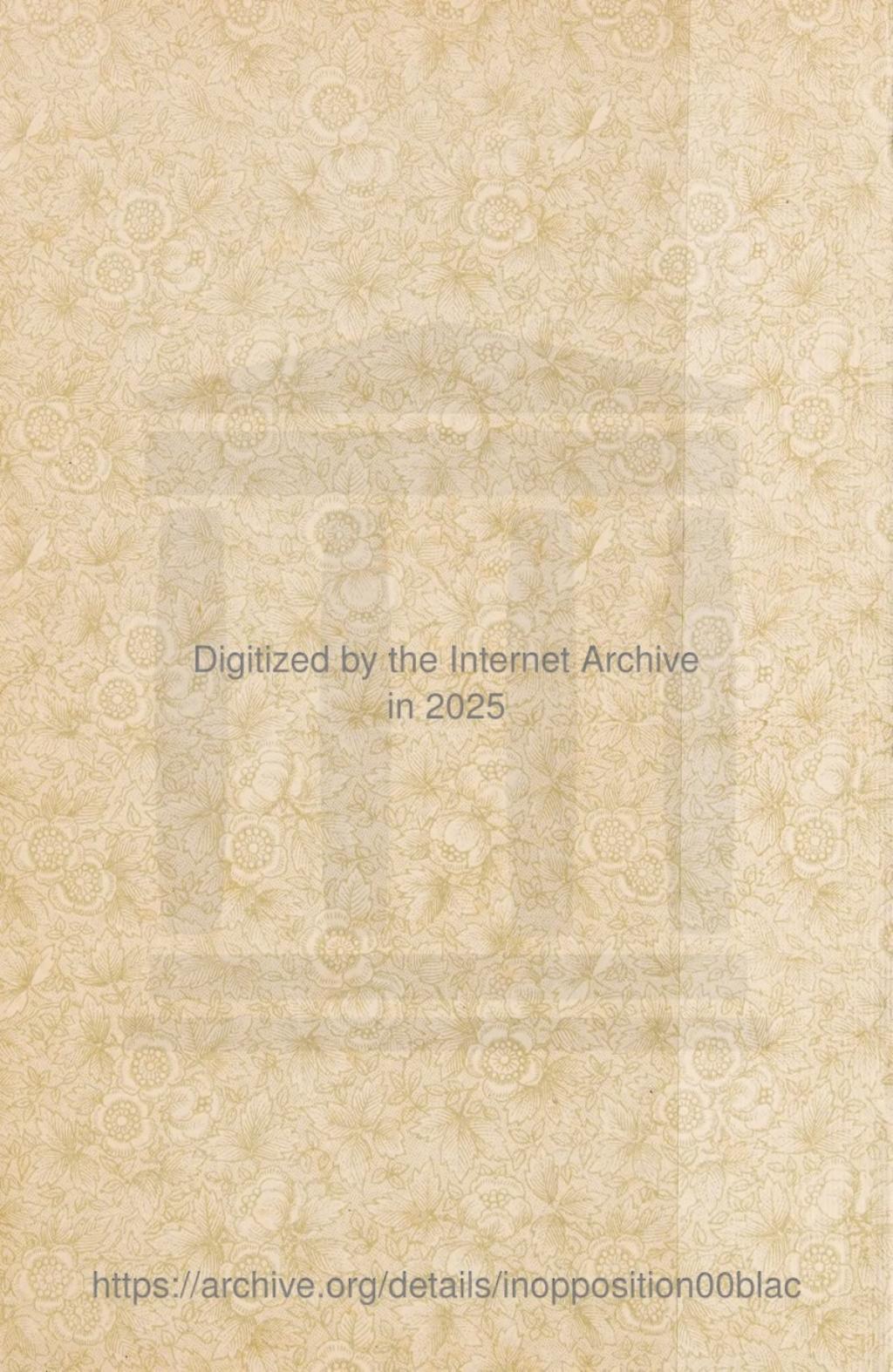


IN OPPOSITION.

By

Cyrtrude M. Ireland Blackburne



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Presented to Emily Bamford
on the attainment of her
21st. Birthday by her dear
Brother

With fondest love and
best wishes.

IN OPPOSITION.

Tho' losses, and crosses,
Be lessons right severe,
There's wit there, ye'll get there,
Y'e'll find nae other where.

BURNS.

"But out of her griefs and cares, as will happen, I think, when these trials fall upon a kindly heart and are not too unbearable, grew up a number of thoughts and excellences which had never come into existence had not her sorrow and misfortunes engendered them."—ESMOND.

IN OPPOSITION

BY

GERTRUDE M. IRELAND BLACKBURN

IN THREE VOLUMES

VOL. I.

WARD AND DOWNEY

12, YORK STREET, COVENT GARDEN, LONDON

1888

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Recommencez toujours ! ni trêve, ni remords.
Allez, recommencez, veillez, et sans relâche
Roulez votre rocher, refaites votre tâche.

VICTOR HUGO.

TO

J. S. AND TO K. P. S.

This Sketch

IN MEMORY OF 1883—1888

IN OPPOSITION.

Book I.—Marshalled.

CHAPTER I.

HER HUSBAND.

“To pound the objects of sentiment into small dust, yet keep sentiment alive and active, is something like the famous recipe for making cannon—to first take a round hole and then inclose it with iron; whatever you do keeping fast hold of your round hole.”—*Daniel Deronda*.

“REMEMBER! I have given in to your wishes long after you had any reasonable excuse to make. In future, Vera, mine must be consulted.”

Any one who had once seen Sir Ralph Carstairs in public would have called him persevering; in private, obstinate. When

he was not satisfied, some one would have a bad time till his way was made as he chose, or till his wishes were fulfilled, for they were never forgotten.

His young wife only pleaded for respite with her great pathetic eyes.

“Give me a short time longer. I cannot bear it yet.”

“This is childish. I require you; that is enough. I don’t ask impossibilities. I simply demand that you should be civil to those who have—well, all men have, in fact—power to make or mar a career such as mine. Have I worked and waited all these years now to be balked by *you*? Goodness knows, I made a mistake in marrying you! I wanted a woman with intelligence and beauty; you seem to take a pride in disguising that you have either.”

As usual—what does as usual not mean?—Vera Carstairs met her husband's reproaches in silence; perhaps because so far as any one can be used to the disagreeable she was “used to it;” perhaps because she, too, had something to say.

But—Carstairs knew that well enough—the words were untruthful as well as insulting.

So far he was right, that a certain air of listlessness, a slight apparent indifference to any special attractiveness in her plain mourning frock, and traces of illness and suffering, had a little taken from her good looks; but no severity of style or weariness in her expression could disguise the fact that Lady Carstairs was beautiful.

Of course, like many a beautiful woman she might at first sight be overlooked in

favour of one who were merely pretty. Like many a thoughtful soul she did not readily part with her best to the first comer. She was personally shy, and few knew how good and true she was.

Her husband—but let him, as others, speak for himself. There are no strange characters in this story, they are all people you meet in good houses, and especially in a set with one foot on the social, the other on the political, nature of things. Some of our readers may know them already—may know Ralph Carstairs the egotist; Paul Wordsworth the philanthropic and philosophic litterateur and statesman; his nephew, Grey Meredith, once *the “favourite of the House.”* Perhaps they have been entertained by Lady Carstairs; and Georgie Leyton, I know, took

good care to be noticed and heard everywhere. As for Ralph's brother, there are so many similar youths of eighteen that I cannot wonder if you do not remember which name he goes by. Poor Charlie! *he* thinks he is original!

However, if you do not yet know them you can if you like make the acquaintance of each and all in turn, just as they are, with all their weaknesses and inconsistencies. I paint no perfect beings, for those I never met.

And now let us go back to the shores of the Italian lake, and hear what says Ralph Carstairs to his young wife. He, for one, is not perfect, unless, did we know all, we chose to call him a "perfect brute." But that again would scarcely be fair. Some people thought a good deal of him;

none perhaps as much as he did of himself; and, unfortunately, “there are worse people in the world than Carstairs,” as a friend of his always says.

Worse, maybe; certainly few more irritating. Listen to him in his egotistical voice, the picture of a good-looking, well-fed M.P.; a man with cast-iron nerves and unfailing powers. He does not care what she feels; she, with the sweet sad face, and the graceful fragile form.

Looking down indifferently on the beautiful countenance framed in its masses of dark hair, and untouched by its plea, Carstairs continued :

“As a matter of fact, it will suit *me* that you don’t go back now. I arrange for you to stay here till after the recess. You may mope as you please till then;

after that I meet you in Paris, and you come home with Me and exert yourself to make My house habitable till we go to Temple."

Using a curt business-like tone, lighting a cigar meanwhile, he stood by the large window of a salon in the centre of the Cadenabbian hotel, shadowed by the verandah-balcony.

"I can stay at Como till the middle of May? You will go back to town without me?" she exclaimed, more cheerfully.

"I knew one way to please you at least," he said sardonically. "In return for this, remember on your return I expect to be treated as your husband."

"Can I ever forget that you are my husband? Do I?"

"I don't know; how can I tell? I have

been forbearing enough. . . . That is past. Of what I said yesterday —”

She rose to her feet, colour in her hitherto pallid face.

“Ralph, not yet. I see only Daisy.”

He shrugged his shoulders and turned away, looking over the lake. He expected, perhaps, to hear her sob. There was no sound. Other denizens of the place were at luncheon; all was still, and calm sunshine without glimmered on the placid lake.

“What do you require?” he heard her say in a calm tone, after the silence had been prolonged.

“Common sense,” he rejoined roughly, turning to face her. “I only ask you for what ninety-nine women out of a hundred would give their eyes to do. It has looked like it lately, but surely you are not a fool?

My success is now, to a great extent, not dependent on myself, but on the amount of social pressure I can apply in the right direction. When I tell you to spend time and money on your clothes, to give good dinners to the men who can amuse you, to make the most of an uncommonly good position and a fair share of brains and decent looks, is that an awful command?"

She did not answer. He looked at her curiously, then continued, as if it had been spoken of before:

"I'm off in twenty minutes, I suppose, by the afternoon steamer; do you want anything before I go?"

"Off?" said the wife in surprise.

"I was able to divine your wishes and thought it well to shorten the agony of parting," he sneered again. "All is ar-

ranged. Eustace goes with me of course—that courier, Finch, remains with you. When he was arranging for Charlie and his tutor I told him that you would stay here, and that he was not to give up my bedroom ; it would be required to-morrow for your guest, Miss Leyton, who would stay as long as you did."

"That she shall not!" Vera exclaimed.
"This is too much."

"Why?"

"Do you need to be told why? It is like you to treat me as a child—to tell your servants your arrangements, ignoring me. But to ask that woman, Georgina Leyton, and fifteen minutes before you go to tell me that you mean her to stay with me a month! You can go; she may come; your brother Charlie can entertain her : I go too."

“With whom? Where? I only ask out of curiosity. I am so glad; I thought Georgie’s companionship would be beneficial, and the very mention of her name has acted on you like a tonic.”

“Telegraph to her that I shall not stay here; I will go back with you sooner.”

“I did not know that you hated her so much as *that*,” said Carstairs epigrammatically, but in genuine surprise. “It is too late. You have your wish—you remain here. As for Georgie, you know you were a little jealous of her because she and I always pulled well together. I shall be out of the way this time.”

“Then why not wait to entertain her till *you* can do so. Well! she won’t come to me.”

“*Won’t* she? She’s at Milan. I mean

she will arrive to-morrow ; I had a wire this morning. Now don't be so ridiculous ; Georgie will be no trouble to you. She has hard work to make ends meet round all the amusement she wants in life. I can't give her money, and, now my mother's dead, how can I help my pretty cousin except through my wife ? ”

“ You choose to say this,” she answered coldly.

“ I hear the steamer. I take Finch with me and leave him at Milan this evening to meet Georgie to-morrow and bring her here.”

A few more unimportant words passed—all taking for granted the arrangement which suddenly gave Vera a month's respite, but for that month forced upon her the prospect of living with a woman dis-

liked by Vera as only a gentle nature can dislike another woman whose character she despises,—yet dreads.

The moment for the departure of her husband came.

“Well, good-bye, Vera,” he said. “I’m off!”

“Good-bye,” she answered, scarcely moving. She was far too indignant to speak any other word.

Thus they parted.

She was only four-and-twenty, and this was not a quarrel, but the result of an estrangement of life from life.



CHAPTER II.

DAISY.

"It is written as she thought it ; she thought in blanks, as girls do, and some women. A shadow of the male egoist is in the chamber of their brains, overawing them."—*The Egoist*, G. MEREDITH.

SADDEST of all things—unless those touched by crime and some of those brought by Death himself—are such farewells of relief.

A farewell is happy as it is sad.

The matted blind slowly waved backward and forward over the square-flagged balcony. Vera, left alone, went on to it, and pushing it aside leant over the stone balustrade.

Sir Ralph came out and stood smoking calmly ; a tall figure with the irrepressible trick of putting himself always in evidence ;

all the blatant egotism possible to a sufficiently well-bred man patent in every gesture—at least to one who had suffered from it. Her husband was watching his servant and his fellow-passengers, and never even by accident looked up to the front balcony where the shapely head seemed to follow his movements. Stung by the little extra slight—though the natural consequence of estrangement—Vera forgot that he was there, going away; she thought only of what he was to her life.

Some people came on to the next balcony. One girl there whispered to another, “That’s Lady Carstairs, who lost her child so sadly last autumn. The Carstairs live near us, you know. I think she is *so* lovely.”

“She looks awfully sad now.”

“Her husband is going back for work;

the courier told Heath. That's what makes her look unhappy, perhaps."

From this remark it is evident that Anice Bentley was very young, and moreover did not know anything of the Carstairs; also that a conventional attitude gains credit.

But Vera did not see her husband's figure cross the gangway to the steamer below.

Nor, lover of nature as she was, did her eyes then take in the beauty of the scene beyond, perhaps the loveliest view of that loveliest lake of Como as seen from its own shore.

The lake lay before her unseeing eyes, silvery grey beneath an intensely blue sky: held between the depths were the steep square ridges of Monte Primo and the tongue of pine-crowned hill under which

Bellagio glittered in the afternoon light : above, the sharp-peaked Alps stretched over the concealed shore of Lecco.

The steamer finally snorted ; the green water flashed into light which seemed to dissolve softly in creamy lace-like foam. The “Unione” bore Sir Ralph away without a backward glance on his part ; he was making some remark to a man ; they turned to regard Bellagio.

Vera saw this, and noted the steamer’s name with that strange turn for nonsense in verbal sequence well known to the unhappy—the amusement of a restless brain neglected in obedience to the imperious claim of the emotions.

“ *Unione*, ” said she thus, “ *L’Union fait la force*? Our union makes our weakness, mine at least. What does anything matter

to him? I should be happier if he were wretched too, I believe, *as I am.*"

The girls on the next balcony saw that Lady Carstairs suddenly left her post; but no one saw her, else perhaps she had not yielded, as in the darkened room within she flung herself on the sofa and gave way to her feelings of despair. Probably for the first time since her child's death she longed for any one—any one, no matter who—whom she could have spoken to, or even in silence, best of all, been helped by with touch or caress. And she stretched out her arms against the sofa—the hard sofa—as if it were something pitifully pressing her form to make her feel that she was not alone in life.

It so happened that for to-day she was alone in the hotel; young Carstairs and his

tutor absent, her husband suddenly gone, and Georgie Leyton arriving twenty-four hours later.

She was alone ; all the better ; she would, as soon as she could calm herself, put away the past, think over the future, and awake her ambition, if her heart must be trained to keep secret its own bitterness.

Put away the past ! Not let the memory of that little child come between herself and him who desired an heir next to his own immediate success ; who now, as he had said in the days of his love, and since, with involuntary compliment, wished that a woman who looked born to the woman's kingdom should mount her throne.

But a woman like Vera does not care for a crown till she has seen the subject over whom she wishes to reign. To win

her way for the sake of a husband whose success was nothing to her, that was the point at which she was to aim. She might have done so, even willingly, if he had let little Daisy live.

Once more, before she tried to put it away for ever—nothing could help her to bring back the past—she would allow herself to think of Daisy's death.

Ralph had never cared much for the little thing; it was only a girl. So Vera perhaps loved her child the more, as she felt that even in those early days of her marriage and of the first child's life, her husband was disappointed with them both. Then she had not realized how little affection he could give even had he not been disappointed. During Daisy's life Vera developed in many ways. Though very

young at the time of her marriage, and of a simple loving nature, she remained unaffected by the surroundings natural to the wife of the busy ambitious politician, who poses as the independent patriot while scheming in all possible ways to make to himself the fetters of party-power. He was still outside the Cabinet, his party at present out of office.

He observed, with some pleasure and wonder, that Vera attracted men of mark, though, as he said, she had no more idea of flirting than of flying. It irritated him that she seemed unconscious of this: it was waste of power. As a practical man he hated that: “in these days when bribery pure and simple—advisedly I use these epithets—is not considered quite decent, we *must* have women’s influence. It is the

only thing which you can generally rely on for a few days together ; and, with all due deference to the sex, it is only a few women who do attract men.” So Sir Ralph Carstairs had said ; and he looked upon his wife’s beautiful eyes, and restful simple interest in the hopes of workers, as part of his political stock-in-trade. He was scarcely capable of feeling jealousy about her ; he thought her too safe, and, if not, up to the present those whom the world would also count safe men had been her friends.

And Vera had real friends, but she was not popular. No one is by force of merit ; popularity is a reward earned by exertion though exertion may never earn it.

Meanwhile, at home, Vera was not happy ; how could she be with this husband ? He had been accepted because he

was good-looking, and had seemed passionately in love with her; because every one thought it was "such a good thing for her;" and because—as only the poor child knew, and was afraid to own to herself—because Grey Winter had gone away and evidently did not care for her!

Three years of Daisy's life passed; she was so quaint and so pretty. Already, however, it was remarked that if she had inherited her mother's beauty she also had some share of her father's obstinacy.

One little anecdote was long remembered of her.

She used to dine at her mother's luncheon that last summer, when the Carstairs had gone to their country house, Temple.

One day she was left to the care of the old-fashioned housekeeper; every one was

out, and the old woman was devoted to the child.

The luncheon provided for the twain was of a wholesome character and of simple appearance. Daisy was not at all greedy, nor used to expect to eat whatever luxuries she saw, but evidently she quietly resented the want of state.

“Say grace, Miss Daisy, dear,” said the old housekeeper.

Daisy refused silently. Pauses, entreaties and commands had failed.

Suddenly—like an older person willing, though sure of being right, to make some compromise to meet another’s unreason—Daisy turned round to Mrs. Blake:

“I’s e ’ay grace,” she said.

“There’s a good child; not keep poor Blakie waiting any longer, will she?”

A pause of deliberate consideration.

Then, rapidly and firmly, “AMEN—that’s-
quite-enough-for-to-day.”*

The old servant was scandalized at such
an adjustment of payment to result; but
Daisy got her simplified dinner for her
shorn grace. “She has a way with her
for all the world like her father,” argued
the old servant.

She was a wonderfully knowing child—
no doubt of that! Her mischief had in
it real childish wit. Once or twice even
Sir Ralph noticed her, but this was not
to be desired, as he provoked her to
naughtiness and then blamed Vera for the
consequences.

Daisy did not care much for her father,
which want of affection was not Vera’s

* A fact.

fault ; she hoped Daisy might win his heart, but the child resented his uncertain treatment of herself, or her instinct penetrated to the harshness of his character, as children's spirits can ; and so the father and child were mutually unsympathetic.

But on Daisy's birthday he had a sudden impulse of domesticity. He brought home an expensive and ugly Paris doll, with various mechanical arrangements, as uncouth or artificial as the donor's attempts at parental playfulness. However, to do him justice, this was a step in the right direction. Vera was cheered, and Daisy received this overture graciously ; but the bairn did not like the toy, and laid it aside for that which she did like.

That afternoon Carstairs expected the visit of an important constituent about an

annoying piece of business. By his own desire the interview was arranged at his home. However the matter should end, Carstairs wished his opponent to be impressed with his member's house, and, either to cover annoyance or to cement a bargain, an introduction to Lady Carstairs had often proved desirable.

The man did not arrive. Sir Ralph was annoyed. Bored at home, yet unwilling to go out in case the client might come in late, Carstairs went up to the drawing-room and found Daisy with her mother, alone. Irritated already, Sir Ralph bethought him of the neglected doll, and made another attempt on behalf of it and himself. He thought the toy clever, and I am not sure whether he did not believe himself a better judge of a doll than

Daisy could possibly be. What Sir Ralph thought suitable for another must be suitable.

Presently Daisy slipped off his knee with one shoulder up; by this she signified that if her father was bored she was also.

Sir Ralph turned on his wife :

"How extraordinary it is, Vera, that with all your pretence of devotion to the child you do not teach her to behave properly when she is with Me!"

(The capital letter always should be expressed in the language of Carstairs: his *Me* was superb.)

Daisy was not supposed to understand; but she knew quite well a good deal more than many would think possible. Intellect and language develop much earlier

with some people's children than with those of others.

So Daisy had not only felt but (checked yet admired by her mother) had remarked that papa was so often cross. "She did not like him to be at home when she was with mammy. Would not mammy like him to go away too?"

And now Daisy sat on the floor and solemnly gazed at her parents, while Vera answered gently, "Daisy is not much used to notice from you, and for the moment she scarcely cares for the doll. One can't expect a child to hide its feelings."

"I suppose she leaves that to her mother."

Vera saw that Sir Ralph was in one of his sullen moods to day. He chiefly reserved them for his wife. Some people called him "occasionally a little brusque;"

but many have an idea that abruptness implies frankness ; besides, outsiders can avoid each other till things are smooth once more. Sir Ralph was sensible enough to his own interests ; and if an extraordinary amount of boorishness was working in him he became domestic. Not only merriest when away from home, he deliberately stayed there to be surly at ease.

“Daisy,” he said in a minute or two, “come here, you brat.”

Daisy came.

“Look here ; you’re to play with the doll I brought you.”

“Don’t like bwack dollie ; old white dollie pwetty.”

If the humorous side of the struggle struck him—that of a man for his own

childish obstinacy pitting himself against a toddling and determined child on the question of white doll or black—it only more greatly irritated him. Conceit kills the sense of humour—perhaps he had none; and, as a sense of humour is an admirable preservative of dignity, in the undignified wrangle in which he practically lowered himself to the level of his three-year-old child the politician had no advantage. He could doubtless conquer the child and take away “white dollie,” but could he make Daisy smile on the blackamoor? Force reprehensible, sneers incomprehensible—what could he do but wrangle? The word seems absurd, but so was the position of the parent with regard to this strife.

Daisy ran to her mother after a few minutes’ altercation. “I love mammy,” she

asserted, *à propos* of some wonderful process in her own mind which showed a latent feminine instinct of defensive arousing of jealousy as a means of revenge.

Sir Ralph followed and roughly caught her away.

Vera thought the child would cry; but in this conflict of will hers was the dignity. In baby fashion she was well able to take care of herself. As Sir Ralph dragged her across the room she passively resisted; her curly head down on the shoulder towards her mother, and dragging at the full length of her tiny arm from him. He released her so suddenly that she nearly fell; but Daisy's temper was roused. "I like mammy's dollie too," was her undaunted assertion as she recovered.

This was said with baby insolence.

Seeing the reproduction of character in the child, looking so lovely in her white frock, innocent as yet, but already capable of meeting her father after his own fashion; with an awful sudden fear of such development as the years might bring; Vera interfered. It was strange then, but she remembered it later, for the moment she thought with swift sympathy that it was her husband's nature so to be—that it was her part to modify such transmitted influences in her child.

So her “Daisy, don't be naughty,” fell simultaneously with Carstairs' “ You little devil!”

However, in another moment—perhaps realizing that a child repeats all it learns in the way of new words, and more cross for his approach to shame—her husband con-

tinued to her, "I'll ask you to interfere when I need your assistance."

Vera steadily regarded her husband for a moment; rather a look of contempt than of resentment—a young woman's contempt for the petty domestic tyrant. And the child already began to understand! Perhaps it were better that she should go out of the room since Daisy appealed to her. Besides, sneers at herself were being intermixed.

"Where are you going?"

"To fetch a book."

"Can't you ring for what you want, or is early education too strong in you?" He rang. "Ask for what you require."

Vera quietly passed him, and meeting the man, who entered looking subserviently interrogative, she observed:

"Your master wanted you."

Of course this was for the benefit of her husband. The servant waited silently. "Did you ring, sir?" he ventured to say at length.

"No," answered Sir Ralph.

Vera went; because she, like many quiet people, had a warm temper steadily kept under control on most occasions; she could not bear much more. Also, to remain was to yield. None but herself knew how needful it was to make some stand against the absolutism which was being woven round her trivial liberties of personal life.

She had scarcely reached her own room on the floor above before the thought occurred to her that he might ill-treat the child. So she returned.

The staircase of that house is very handsome, and on ordinary occasions a cabinet and a pedestal, with thereon a large vase and

a quantity of frequently-renewed flowers, stand near the drawing-room doors.

One door of the drawing-room was now open. Hearing a cry from Daisy, Vera hastened on, and the child at her entrance ran to her as if it had been terrified.

Vera—so angry—tried to lift Daisy. But, not being strong, Daisy was too heavy for her, and now it suited Sir Ralph to remember that this scene was not good for his wife.

“Put her down at once.”

“What are you doing to my child?”

“Teaching her obedience.”

“Tell me what you wish her to do.”

Vera spoke quietly; she would send Daisy away whatever happened. She rang the bell twice to signify that the nurse was required, as Sir Ralph answered: “She knows what I want; leave her to me.”

"Daisy has not been good; I shall send her to the nursery," said Vera, speaking firmly to the child, but with a look at her husband which warned him that it was not for his sake she was quiet; her blood was up and she was not sorry that the time had come when, Daisy safe, she would measure her force against his.

He came to lead the child away. With another cry Daisy ran from both. A moment later, a footman, coming upstairs to announce the presence of the belated client saw the end of the scene; so he was able to say it was all *accident*.

Daisy ran away.

"She'll fall downstairs, Ralph," cried Vera.

But, as the man said afterwards, "Sir Ralph got between the child and the stairs,

so Miss Daisy turned back like, and how it was he could not say; the *vause*, he should have said was as sure as the *hark*; but somehow the whole thing came down as she fell agin it."

Yes; it was Daisy herself who pulled the pedestal over. It had been carelessly replaced, perhaps, and in her fright she threw her weight on it; so the accident occurred.

A crash, as cabinet and pedestal fell; an oath from Sir Ralph, as, too late, he turned and saw the danger; the man pausing in the message; just one cry from little Daisy as she was struck.

It was only a terrible misfortune. But it had so occurred that life was no longer able to stay in the delicate wee body.

For Daisy lived a few hours after concussion had set in; in her fever she was ter-

rified ; and when the calm came, and Vera looked up to whisper : "She is smiling like herself once more," it was because the child would never fear again.

When nothing more was to be done, Vera was very ill.

She was too ill to realize a double loss for a time ; but every one in town during the autumn session pitied Carstairs for losing his child by that horrid accident ; then, that the little heir lived no more than a few hours ; and that for so long his wife's life was despaired of. How unfortunate some men are !

However, Vera was young and had a good constitution, though so fragile-looking : she could not help returning to the empty world.

It had happened in October ; in February

it was decided that they had better go to the south to complete her recovery.

"Monte Carlo is about the only place I can stand," said Sir Ralph.

Vera, consulted, said: "I don't care; yes, let it be Monte Carlo—there I shall see no children," she added, half to herself.

Carstairs enjoyed himself, and delicious air and bright sunshine almost restored his wife, who, with another woman, like herself unable to care for society, used to spend silent hours in the woods or in the gardens of Monaco far from the motley throng of pleasure-seekers.

By-and-by they moved to Milan. Vera, though well in health, dreaded the return; she pleaded for respite, but the manner of that respite one April morning has already been told.

She was left to put away the past, to

face the future, for this day alone. Estranged as a wife, bereaved as a mother—that was her past; and so young, so fettered, so lonely—what would be her future? She re-lived the past; she broke down; she recovered; still struggling with herself, she was conscious of a sweet odour near her—a presence with her who thought herself alone.

The intruder—embarrassed yet sympathetic—was a young girl; a pretty fair face with pitying eyes, a slight figure in a dark dress, the background to a mass of azaleas, with exquisite colour and delicious scent lightening and freshening the dreary salon.

The girl spoke first, in one of those voices which are full of the music of speech; quite different from, but in their

own way as beautiful as, voices fitted for song.

“Please forgive me. Mother—I am Anice Bentley—sent me to ask for you. I thought you would like some flowers from the Carlotta, and so I knocked. No one answered, so I thought I might leave them. I found after all you were here, and you are all alone. Please——”

Vera interrupted her by holding out her hand. The sweet face, the kindly deed, the evident sympathy must not be treated as intrusion. Vera saw that the girl’s sensitive shyness was struggling within her.

“How good of you! No; stay with me if you have nothing to do. I am not quite strong yet, as I daresay Mrs. Bentley may have told you, so you must forgive

my being foolish. I know all the rest of your family; not you, do I?"

"I am so much the youngest, and though I was presented this spring, just before the workmen turned us out of our house, I have not been out to anything."

"I thought that I had not seen you."

"But I have thought about you ever since you called on us last June," said the girl very quickly. "I was going out, and I saw you; you were all in white with some yellow roses; and—I beg your pardon——"

"For what?" Then she noticed that, colouring at the betrayal of her heroine-worship—the "first-love" of such girls is almost always a woman—Anice had turned away, and that in so doing her eye had caught sight of the photograph of Daisy.

Something in the blushing face told Vera that she had here a friend. Afterwards she said to Anice:

“It seems as if I always had known you.”

So then Vera asked on sudden impulse:

“Did you ever see her?”

“Every day last year I met her in the park. I always spoke to her.”

Suddenly—from which side the initiative had come neither ever knew—Vera felt a human clasp of sympathy, a kiss of affection, and the tear of another touching her own fevered cheeks.

“Thank you, dear,” said Vera. “If you must go, come and see me again; come to-morrow, if you can, in the morning.”

So unlike Vera to thus take to a stranger; but though so little had been

said, intuition had taught either of the other. Very sudden was the friendship of Jonathan and David! And when Anice had gone, the rich scent of the glorious golden flowers remained to gladden Vera's heart with reminder that after each winter there are new blossoms on the earth, and after each season of desolation some new growth of perhaps unexpected sympathy.



CHAPTER III.

LIGHT, BUT NOT LEAL.

“ We oft by lightning read in darkest nights ;
And by your passions I read all your nature
Though you at other times can keep it dark.”

Carewe.

THE party with whom Georgina Leyton was travelling was dining that evening at a table in the restaurant of the Hôtel Continental, Milan. It had lost its interest to her since two younger men had gone on to Venice. Georgie never wasted her time on women ; nor was Mrs. Pellew interesting in herself, and elderly Mr. Pellew was of that staid type of husband-courier who did not count as a man.

So when her temporary chaperon observed : “ We shall be sorry to lose you,”

Georgina Leyton scarcely answered, but continued to gaze out on the square wherein the omnibus might be expected to rattle in a few minutes, bringing Sir Ralph Carstairs.

Had Georgie wished to talk, or had there been any one near whom she would have liked to pose before as an amusing woman even at a distance, she would have practised her wiles albeit only on her elderly fellow-travellers. But as the diners near were quite "impossible," Georgie remained passive; and when the omnibus came in and did not bring her cousin she was too dispirited to make any cutting remarks on live load or dead luggage. Why had he not come? Had he gone straight through?

Dinner over, she followed Mrs. Pellew indifferently into the passage, where marble statuettes and casts for sale simper and grin

on the curious folk who stroll round their domain. Facing the door of the restaurant a mysterious direction confronts the traveller : a hand points to nowhere, apparently, but to a glass case beneath advertisements, and bids the passer-by know that *there* is the English Church ! While Mrs. Pellew solved the problem thereby presented, Georgie, who cared for none of these things, disconsolately threw herself into an American chair, wondering how she was to get through the evening alone with the elder Pellews, and “not a decent-looking” man even in sight.

But somehow she had missed seeing the arrival of Sir Ralph, who had not come by the omnibus, and whose voice now raised her dormant energies.

As he came up to her Georgie Leyton

changed from discontented languor to self-possessed vivacity. Except he were a quick observer, previously, any stranger would have pronounced her uninteresting. Now, she had a little colour under the skin, smooth but not fair, suiting the dark hair; her eyes became bright and her smile gave a piquancy which passed for pleasantness to her face. She was certainly what is called a good-looking girl, with the added stamp of that distinction which impresses itself on one who has had some experience of being thought attractive.

“So you’re there, Pussy cat!” said Sir Ralph by way of greeting; “looking fit enough too. You’re not afraid of a month of Vera, more or less diluted by any amusement you can pick up for yourself? Remember, I guarantee you nothing but

what the servants call your ‘keep,’ not even a welcome from your hostess.”

This speech was blended into Georgie’s greeting of him, and he continued: “Introduce me to those people and get it over; I hope you’ve shaken them off for to-morrow morning?”

“Did *you* arrange it?”

“Oh! Vera does not know that *I* stay here the night, or that *you* get to Milan before to-morrow; I did not trouble her with superfluous explanations.”

Sir Ralph was a different man when he was amusing himself, as was Georgie when amused. They laughed together; the pleasant laugh of intimates with a private joke against a mutual friend, and on excellent terms—perhaps too excellent—with each other.

"Mrs. Pellew wants to know whom I've picked up," said Georgie. "I told her you might be coming and hadn't got here."

"Won't she go to bed, and leave you with your cousin? Have you dined, Puss? Come and eat with me."

"I can't eat two dinners in an hour; but if you're good and have some champagne I'll take it, and watch you eat on condition that you open that window; we shall have the hotel-restaurant to ourselves at this hour. Oh, Mrs. Pellew, let me introduce my cousin, Sir Ralph Carstairs," she continued, as that lady drawing nearer showed symptoms of impatience.

A few conventional words passed; then Georgie announced: "I am going to watch him feed; he says he isn't shy."

Mrs. Pellew looked a little doubtful; she

had only had temporary charge of the younger lady, but even in that time had learnt that chaperons were made for Georgie's neglect. So in a few minutes more the cousins found themselves in the restaurant Georgie had lately left in silence. This time her tongue did not rest. No one else was there—only the polyglot waiter came in at intervals, till a-wearied he too departed, and, seeing a lady and gentleman well occupied together, even left the most junior of waiters to sell the hotel cigars if he could.

Inflicting on this personage disappointment by producing cigarettes, Sir Ralph talked over his dessert in a contented, good-humoured fashion.

“Now, I don't say, Georgie, that you're going to enjoy Cadenabbia; it is rather likely that you won't,” he said with his slower

manner and air of egotism at ease after a good dinner.

“ Well,” she replied, pulling at a bangle on her wrist, “ on the whole I prefer being your guest when you are there! No, thanks; not in a public place like this,” as he offered her the cigarettes; it’s awfully tempting, so don’t do it again! But, you see, after Vera was so stupid last year, it was, as you said, a capital thing to go to her alone; of course, I appreciate your part of the business; and it just suited me.”

“ Well, it ought to,” he rejoined; “ I’ve had enough worry between the two of you.”

“ Tell me, did Vera ask me as a sort of test to see if I’d go to her when you weren’t there, or because she thought she’d do the civil here to get it done with?” inquired

Georgie, with curiosity, but quite complacently.

“ You’re always rather brutal, Georgie,” he said, with a laugh. “ I reply in the same spirit of candour, that till to-day Vera had no idea you were coming to her, or that she was to stay in Italy ; otherwise you’d never have had that sweet little note of let bygones be bygones that I wrung out of her the other day. Vera’s weak enough to be governed by an appeal to what she calls her conscience ; that’s how you got that letter, my dear ! She doesn’t do things by halves either, though ; planning this, I only wanted her to *write* ; I didn’t want her to apologize.”

“ Little she knew of the other letter that came with hers ; would you like to compare them now ? I’ve got it here.”

“ For goodness’ sake, child ! don’t keep my

letters,” exclaimed Sir Ralph with some haste.
“I declare I’ll not write unless you remember
your promise.”

“It will be your loss,” said Georgie with a
flash in her dark eyes. “Your letters are
amusing certainly at times, but I *can* live
without them!”

“Yours lately have been dull enough in all
conscience—certainly not worth postage to
me. But, repartee and joking apart, give me
that letter or destroy it yourself at once.
Just think, if you dropped it by chance!”

“Isn’t it the correct thing for a young lady
to show her correspondence to her chape-
ron?” said Georgie mischievously.

“What do *you* know about the correct
thing, pray?” replied Carstairs laughing, a
little uneasily however. That particular
letter was candid—too candid for publication

--and perhaps Georgie might retain sufficient elements of young ladyhood to leave her letters about in a casual fashion.

"I have thoughts of trying the correct thing for a change. I met rather a prig of a man the other day, who took me for a proper young lady and discoursed platitudes. Do you know what he said to me?"

"What the man said to you? What a man might say to you is a large order; I rather limit the field of speculation and wonder what any man would not say to you," he replied airily.

"If *you* have not self-respect enough to draw the line in the right place," said Georgie, with a sudden tightening of the curves round her firm chin, "I'll thank you not to suppose that others do not—that others do as you do."

Here she lost herself a little, and appeared annoyed; she had betrayed herself by taking him *au grand sérieux*.

“Don’t be ridiculous, Pussy! Have another glass of champagne—just a little more. If *I* can’t say what I like to you, who should?”

He forced her to look at him, and with some lingering unwillingness she smiled a little. But once in the wrong vein a man goes on saying the unpleasant, even when he means to please, and so Carstairs, only wishing to be complimentary, got on to the dubious ground of approval of that of which perhaps *even* Georgie Leyton was consciously ashamed.

“Why, we are relations and friends, and it was just a chance we weren’t more after all! How sensible you were! So many girls

would have never seen that there was no earthly reason why we should not return to our old relationships when we found that other things had fitted in somewhat unexpectedly. I don't think we should have got on together if we couldn't have got away from each other, you know ; so it's all for the best."

Georgie suddenly moved a little and looked behind her. "Is that Mr. Pellew coming ? No. Go on. What were we talking of ? Oh ! I remember," she said suddenly, deliberately forgetting two or three links of the chain ; "I was telling you about my prig. He discoursed for an hour—he was rather good-looking——"

"Oh, I see why you listened."

"I very often have to listen to men who don't know their defects in that way,

relations and friends you see, so my eyes like to rest sometimes. He was good-looking, in earnest, and didn't know my flippant nature, so I actually remember what he said, even though he was rather a bore! Can you ever forgive a man who begins a conversation with the idea that he is going to improve you at the end of it? One meets so many of them now-a-days."

"Hopeless task," said Sir Ralph, not so interested but rather fascinated by watching Georgie, who made a face at the irresistible retort, with its following : "Of course, to improve you is impossible, the perfect—pussy cat!"

"A perfect donkey might be improved if he'd use his ears sometimes!" she said.

"I understand *you* listened to that

end? Excuse me, you said you listened, didn't you? Isn't that using your ears?"

Georgie did not pursue the subject—she had let him lazily score; her revenge was to annoy. "He said," she continued, "that the mistakes of life arose from people never seeing into each other's modes of thought, and that every one ought to try to make every one know what every one else was like——"

"Heaven forbid!"

"Of course, he did not put it like that. You've annoyed me to-night, and so I'm making mistakes; but anyhow, he said that whenever one saw two people suffering from being related without sympathy, one should try to bring them into harmony. Now suppose I had a mission near home? Suppose I said that you and

Vera were splendid subjects to practise on? Well—how could I make her know what you were like better than by showing her that letter?" said Georgie with her half-pleasant smile.

Sir Ralph felt the sting, as intended. He put on something of the manner which by the irony of fate he chiefly used to Vera herself, not to the woman with whom he was accustomed to discuss his wife.

"I suppose you think you understand *me*," he said drily; "we will let that pass—probably you are satisfied with your success."

This was a cowardly stab; they both knew that. Georgie never flinched. She had had bad luck since his allusion to their relations, and, like most women, she

usually appeared to disadvantage in retorting on him she would have ruled. However, she looked at him steadily, and reaped as much victory as may be gained by one whose armour wards off a thrust, but is dinted into the bruised flesh beneath the blow.

"You understand me," he continued; "well, do you understand Vera?"

"What do you mean?"

"Like it or lump it! simply this," he went on with unwonted energy of expression; "you're sharp enough, the devil knows, for most things, but if you lived to be a hundred you'd never make out Vera."

"She left a good deal of room for misunderstanding when she made the row about our riding last year? She's a foo—

I mean she can't conceal her feelings—so she puts herself at my mercy over and over again. Understand her?"

Georgie laughed with two-fold scorn; for Vera, and for the man who had turned upon her for action he encouraged.

"She may put herself at your mercy," he said, as roughly as if he had spoken to Vera herself, "though pray don't deceive yourself; if she knew how to use it she has as much ability in her little finger as you have in all your body! But if she does seem like twenty fools, no woman of your sort ever yet understood a good woman's nature."

"How dare you, Ralph?" said Georgie Leyton in real and, to some extent, rightful wrath.

"Dare?" he said with a laugh. "Oh,

come ; at this time of day I'd dare most things with you, and there isn't much in that. Would you like to be a good woman ? Not you. Vera is a famous example—she's a bore and a bungler, but she does not know what it is to lift a finger to get an advantage for herself. That wouldn't suit your book, Pussy."

"If you cannot talk with more sense and more civility I shall go. I am very sorry I came, and——"

"Gently," he said, satisfied with what he had done in the way of correction of his own disloyalty in another, whom yet he really cared for as he cared for his cousin Georgina Leyton ; "now, don't fire up. We'll talk of something better. I was only saying this for your good."

"For my good ?" she answered bitterly,

with flashing angry eyes. "Did you ever do me good in your life? Since eight years ago, when I was still quite a child——"

"Excuse me, you never were a child since I knew you; you were younger, I allow. But you say you were a child eight years ago——"

"Yes; in thought, in innocence——"

"Of a kind," he persisted, taking pleasure in seeing her wince and colour. "Eight years ago! What a memory you have!"

"My memory has less to burden it than yours."

"Well, eight years ago?" he said, to see if she would speak.

"Eight years ago you began to behave like a blackguard to me. I count that from the first moment that we met."

Never had Georgie thrust with more

right or with more dignity, and, though spoken in anger, this truth went home. After a pause he could only say with unsuccessful insolence—unsuccessful because appearing an attempt to cover a retreat: “ You have been uncommonly lenient to a blackguard then—for eight years! Hullo ! ” he said, as she rose in anger at last, “ I say, don’t go; I haven’t meant anything. Pussy! Georgie ! ”

But for once—alas ! it was only for once—Georgie retreated in dignity, and he could scarcely cover his own astonishment, even to the eyes of the afar-off inquiring young waiter, by springing up to open the door as if the retirement of mademoiselle had been not unexpected though evidently precipitate. He was vexed with himself, not that he had given pain or had been un-

chivalrous but, that he had driven her away when she might have amused him till bedtime. It was not worth while going out, and he pitied his own dulness.

Chance, however, favoured him with a companion till then unknown, but with whom he had a link of which he wotted nothing.



CHAPTER IV.

A SHALLOW STREAM.

"Of very soft society and great showing; indeed, to speak feelingly of him, he is the card or calendar of gentry."—*Hamlet*.

"SEEN *him* before or only his type?" soliloquized Carstairs idly as another Englishman swung the door open, and with no signs of travel about him proceeded to eat at an hour which none but an ultra-fashionable of the future could consider as *dinner-able*.

More discomposed by Georgie's absence in the present than by her arraignment of him in the past, Sir Ralph scanned the companion of his solitude. "Tall, fair, good-looking, probably about eight-and-

twenty, well-groomed head set on square shoulders, pleasant voice, excellent manner ; now, should I say he was clever ? No—thinks he is ; not a barrister but some sort of standing like that. Wonder where I've seen him ? ”

The young man ran his fingers over the table as if playing a tune. “ Of course,” continued Sir Ralph, who had that knack of remembering faces which those in whom it is born specially cultivate if they have to live on the public, “ I knew I had met him ; it’s Paul Wordsworth’s nephew, Grey Meredith.”

Paul Wordsworth, as every one knows, is one of England’s strong men. To Paul Wordsworth as yet Carstairs had not made himself commendable ; to Paul Wordsworth Carstairs earnestly desired to be invaluable.

Sure of his man, Sir Ralph consulted his mental note-book: "People whom I ought to secure;" and there, as he smoked on, he found recorded the entrance of this young man to the House a year ago at a by-election, coming soon after he had inherited some property and changed his name from something or other on that account. "Better know him than not," had been the impression of Carstairs; "he is insignificant, but a link to others. Your independent member by profession has to be your dependent touter in practice."

Partly for this reason, partly because Carstairs was an egotist in the minutest detail of his life, he chose to make an introduction of the, under such circumstances, natural casual talk of two men obviously of the same nation and nurture.

Meredith, of course, was cognizant of the position of Carstairs, and aware of another fact, that Carstairs had married and did not appreciate Vera Ludlow. He showed no alacrity to respond to the civilities of his senior in age and position, though in his turn Meredith might have well put Carstairs down on a list of "People who can get me on." But even as a struggling man he had not paid the usual nineteenth-century attention to the right people to know; nor had exercised the proper neglect of the people whom he could get no advantage from. Now well off, he did no better. He did not like Carstairs—*voilà tout.*

"Sorry to hear of your illness; suppose that's what brought you away from home," Carstairs said after the preliminary speech,

with his urbane manner of talking to a masculine equal. It was strange that delighting to be with women—with some women—he appeared always to much better advantage with any or with all men, and knew himself to have the qualities of success rather than of sympathy. Therefore men appreciated his abilities most when they knew who owned them. And, as now, in the simple comment there was not the genuine ring of pleasant feeling, there was the flattery that *Carstairs*, who had so much to think of, should remember the illness of a new member. By this time Meredith answered less stiffly.

“Not quite the pleasantest thing in the world to have typhoid in one’s second session, and be utterly disabled for two months. However, I’m fit enough now.

My only excuses are my doctor's fad and the convenience of a friend who paired with me, and I'm bringing my mother out, too, like a dutiful son!"

They talked of Italian lakes and of English politics, and as they stood up to separate Meredith said what he had wished to say, as a stranger may remark on any well-known fact.

"I trust Lady Carstairs is stronger?"

With the casual manner natural when speaking of his wife, Carstairs answered :

"Thanks, yes; her illness has been chiefly nervous for a long time. But I think she will be all right when she gets back to town."

"Is she with you here?" said Meredith with a little hesitation. Perhaps he was not sure whether Carstairs would

resent or wonder at the question from a stranger.

"No," said Carstairs, "I'm a bachelor for the moment." His wife's movements did not interest him, and he had no idea that they could interest Grey Meredith, any more than he had an idea that eyes were scrutinizing him to see what the husband of Vera Ludlow was like; that Grey Meredith was surveying him with a contempt for which certain old memories of Vera Ludlow were responsible; or that Grey Meredith all unconsciously was on his way to see what her husband had made of Vera Ludlow. If Grey Meredith had known it *perhaps* he would have gone elsewhere.

Carstairs presently went to the reading-room. He looked at the belittered table and at the clock, and then wrote a note:

"DEAR PUSSY,—If you want to come out shopping with me I'll be ready to-morrow at 10.30. Have your things ready, and I'll take you to the tram at one and see you off. We needn't come back here. Send me a line with your wishes in morning.—R. V. C.

"P.S.—As we have so little time, Pussy must be amiable."

This was directed and sent up to Miss Leyton.

Certainly after what had passed it did not say much either for man or woman that apology and forgiveness should take this form; but he had had experience, and therefore Sir Ralph had not miscalculated the effect of this note.

Georgie did not stand on her dignity when her greediness could be gratified, any

more than on her conscience when her convenience was concerned.

She had said good-bye to her chaperon, given directions to the courier, and was ready before ten o'clock to go out with her cousin till it was time to start from the station whence the tram conveyed passengers to the Como steamer. She knew the shops in Milan were excellent, and though her outburst had been genuine, recalling it in daylight she was only glad as it worked as a lever to excite Carstairs to action. She was not disappointed. They scarcely noticed Leonardo da Vinci standing in his majestic aspect in the square, but as they passed through the great Gallerie Victor Emmanuele, talking and laughing, they picked up a *valet de place*, and loaded him with many a

package—gloves, knick-knacks, scents and an enormous packet of sweets. Opposite, the cathedral is seen sparklingly white against the blue sky, but Georgie was not ready for that. A tiny diamond pin glittered among its fellows in one of the windows, from which it was taken to fasten the lace escaping from its place on Georgie's neck.

That was all the shopping Carstairs meant to do for her that day, as Georgie was aware by instinct, and the new hat she had hoped for could easily be paid for out of her savings on the gloves, which for long enough would cost her nothing. So making a virtue of necessity she proposed that they should go to the cathedral. They ought to see it, "Unless," she added, "you have anything to buy for Vera."

This was to show she intended to jest on the subject again.

“ You’re a wicked girl, Puss ; you know you are,” he said, delighted with her roguish look, and taking it, as Georgie expected, as an extra ingredient in his pleasure to mark the contrast between his liberality to his cousin and his neglect of his wife.

“ Do we want this man with us ? Could he be sent to the station with the things ? ” she asked.

The matter was arranged. Then they sauntered in the fresh sunshine across the Piazza, its busy life dwarfed in contrast with the pile above, and they entered into the great hush of the shadowed cathedral, which awed Georgie and appealed to the æsthetic feelings of Carstairs.

It was a festival, soon after Easter, and High Mass was proceeding at the east end; the discordant music of the careless choristers toned by the great spaces above and around; and in the distance the smoke of incense fluttered in the light in mysterious stillness. If everywhere, save far away round the high altar and in a little side-chapel, there was constant movement and curious observation, yet a still sacredness was over all, and under the influence of the monument of the faith of centuries the two worldlings hushed their flippant speech.

As they reached the centre Georgie whispered :

“Vera would like this;” for once with no malice in the remembrance.

“Yes,” he said; “she stayed here for one afternoon and wanted to come again.”

"More than I should like to do," said Georgie. "It's very beautiful, of course, but—"

"Madame would wish to ascend the staircase outside the Duomo?" inquired a voice—that of a cathedral-guide.

"Rather go to the silver chapel."

But the chapel was shut where San Carlo Borromeo lies enshrined, and Georgie had a fancy to go outside. Yes, they would have time; at least they could go up to the botanical garden.

"And not one step further, Puss, do I go," asseverated Sir Ralph, when they had reached the leads from whence is viewed the richly-carved floreate decorations of the flying buttresses from nave to aisle.

"I should like to go up," she said.
"Will it take long?"

"They might have time," said the guide.

But Carstairs remonstrated. He was not going up, and if he went, what chance was there for a rational being to converse, corkscrewing round a stone pillar for half an hour, and losing his breath, and his head ultimately? There was no view at that hour and season, and if there were he thought Georgie might give way. So she did, and they walked on the leads and forgot to look at the gigantic statues, or to marvel anew at the myriad carvings, till, recollecting the time, they hastened down, and overtook Grey Meredith at the foot of the staircase. The men exchanged a word or two, and lifting his hat to Georgie as they parted outside the Duomo, Grey Meredith apologized to Carstairs for his

haste. He was afraid of being late at the station.

“Who is he?” said Georgie.

From his companion’s point of view this time Carstairs gave a sketch of Meredith’s career so far as he knew it: that Meredith had unexpectedly inherited wealth, that he had gone into the House a short time before, and finally that he was quite worth marrying.

“Never thought of it, or I would have introduced him. Well, if you meet him again, don’t let him slip through your fingers, Georgie; he is by no means a millionaire, but you might do worse.”

“I’ll remember,” said Georgie demurely.
“Perhaps we shall see him in town.”

“I certainly intend to make him come to us, if Vera doesn’t frighten every one

away," rejoined her cousin. " He told me he was going to the Lakes ; so if you come across him, mind that Vera is civil to him. I wish I had introduced him to you ; no fear of your being too reserved to a decent-looking man, eh Puss ? "

" I am afraid that my original standard has been dragged down by the weight of your influence. It would not do to be always particular about a man's looks," she said, with one of her side glances, as if playfully deprecating his appearance.

They reached the station in good time, and Georgie was settled into her place, with food for body and mind. She had no maid with her, but Eustace was to escort her to Cadenabbia, and Carstairs had to leave her in his care before the tram started.

The courier, not wanted, retreated to find

his place. There were few passengers by the tram-cars that day; and when an old lady and her companion attempted to get in to her compartment, Georgie's behaviour so obviously suggested that she did not want them, that they went on to the next carriage.

"There's room here, Mrs. Winter," she heard the companion say to the fretful elderly lady.

"Glad there is," was the next remark which came down the open centre of the tram in a high-pitched tone. "There is an ill-bred young woman, whom I wouldn't travel with for any sum of money, in that part of this extraordinary conveyance. Are you quite sure this goes to Como? Where's my son? I know he'll be left behind. Why can't you call him?"

The man came for tickets. Carstairs got out, still laughing over the old lady and Georgie. If she had had any one to speak to, Georgie would have mimicked the anxious mother after shutting the door between the compartments. The old lady's companion and herself met as both were in the act of attempting to cut off communication in this way.

Returning to her seat, with just a faint reflection that the pale-faced, ostentatiously simply-dressed girl, who had to be at this lady's call always, was younger than herself, Georgie was about to dismiss the old lady from her mind, when up came the old lady's missing son—Grey Meredith.

Georgie was one of those women who resent any good-looking man of their own class being in their neighbourhood without

paying them attention, and very sorry was the young lady that she had not been more civil to another traveller. After all, though rarely, men may not only have mothers, but *may* travel with them; and “frumps” sometimes have good-looking sons with money, who *may* prefer that their mothers should be treated with deference. However, on the other hand, such little mistakes never prevent a man who wants to ignore them from finding out an attractive woman. If Mr. Grey Meredith did not find Miss Leyton was attractive at Cadenabbia that was his loss, not hers.

Still, it was a bother that this time was wasted. Surely he might leave his mother to herself and her companion, and walk along the tram. He did do so once; but,

though he recognized Georgie as the companion of Carstairs, naturally it was not his place to address her; nor had she just then any pretext for arresting him on his return.

Fate favoured her. The tram divides into two parts suddenly, and the courier, who ought to have known better, was left behind in the Varesa portion as Georgie went forward with the Como carriages. The courier would not be able to get on further than Como that day. There Georgie could not stay alone; and as soon as this was discovered Meredith, who saw her difficulty, came to the rescue, when the little meeting in the morning was as good as an introduction. They soon arranged about the details of the journey, and Meredith found himself installed as Georgie's courier.

Nothing could have been better than the accident of Eustace remaining in the Varesa tram. Of course it was natural that Georgie should be introduced to his mother; and, when on the steamer Mrs. Winter preferred to go below, it was as natural that Meredith should take care of Georgie on the deck.

They talked of mutual acquaintances quickly discovered; they talked of experiences of travel and *table d'hôte*; yet somehow Georgie did not mention whom she was going to stay with at Cadenabbia; and one thing rather bored her, that Meredith, though very civil and attentive, was perfectly ready to admire the scenery or scan the passengers. On the whole, though she knew he must be used to society, her attention-analytical mind came to the dis-

illusionizing conclusion that the intention to please necessary to a *succès d'esprit* came from her side, not from his!



CHAPTER V.

ALLIES.

"I am boy to them all three."—*Henry V.*

As she came to see Vera next morning Anice Bentley was met with warm and ready welcome. Vera could scarcely explain to herself the pleasure which the presence of this young girl gave her. They talked for about twenty minutes and then Vera said, "I wonder if you could be spared to go for a little walk with me this afternoon."

Anice eagerly assented, explaining that she was the "odd one" of the party, who was rather expected to find her own amusements.

"There is one girl here whom I don't like, and have often to go out with, because, you see, mother sees so little of my sister, and my sister of her husband, in town, and they have so much to talk about which they won't talk of before me. I think it is a little tiresome to be much the youngest of a busy family. Oh! I can go quite well. I know they won't want me."

"I shall have to be back at four to meet my cousin, but you'll come in and have tea with us."

"You'll want to talk to her alone, won't you?" said Anice doubtfully.

Vera smiled a little. She want to talk to Georgina Leyton alone!

"Not at all. I shall see as much of Miss Leyton as I want to. I'll ask Charlie Carstairs and his tutor to come in also.

You don't know my young brother-in-law? He's rather a nice boy, but horribly idle; he's supposed to be reading here."

"Oh! I know him," said Anice smiling; "he and a cousin of mine used to compete for the lowest places in the form; but he rows well, and is a very nice boy."

He was her own age, of course. At this moment *he* entered, in white flannels and blue sash, looking as bonny a specimen of the athletic English youth as one could meet with. Behind him his tutor, only some seven years his senior, but with no trace of youthful looks; an emaciated little man, adding spectacles to his boating costume, and, because his legs were particularly bad, wearing tight knickerbockers and striped stockings, as such men will always do.

They came to see if Vera would go out

on the lake with them, and finding that Anice would be delighted to go with her, the four departed with an unfulfilled stipulation on the part of Vera that she should be allowed to return in time to meet her cousin. But they went further than they intended, and between Georgie Leyton and Charlie Carstairs no love was lost, so that Georgie arrived at Cadenabbia and Vera was not there to receive her.

Georgie waited a few moments and saw no face she recognized. Not pleased when, having arranged his mother's things, Grey Meredith came to her, Georgie said, "I thought that my cousin would at least have sent her maid to me, even if she supposed me to have a courier."

"For whom shall I ask?" said Grey, busy with her parcels.

" Didn't I tell you ? Lady Carstairs."

" I thought she had returned to England with her husband," exclaimed Grey involuntarily.

" No, or I shouldn't be here. Thanks, very much. I am not really helpless ; it is only that one doesn't like to arrive without a welcome, you know."

" Even the appearance of that must be a novelty to you," said Grey readily. " I am sure it is only an accident."

Georgie's internal conviction that it was Vera's mode of showing displeasure and a secret resolution to revenge herself for the slight were not allowed to appear till she found herself alone with Vera's maid.

Bennett was a woman whom Sir Ralph insisted on keeping as his wife's attendant against her will. Bennett liked and ad-

mired Georgie, and, just keeping on the safe side of impertinence, covertly showed that she despised Vera, her present mistress. She had been with the late Lady Carstairs, Georgie's aunt, and knew more than most people about the relations between the cousins; she had seen Georgie when she heard of Sir Ralph's engagement to Miss Ludlow.

"Lady Carstairs left no message for me? Has been gone for some hours? On purpose, I suppose!" said Georgie, flinging herself into a chair.

"She said no word, good, bad, or indifferent, about you, Miss Georgie; she just went off this morning with Mr. Carstairs and that tutor of his—much tutoring they do in a place like this—and a Miss Bentley's gone with them. Finch took your room

for you yesterday; Sir Ralph's room it was."

Georgie looked up interrogatively.

"Yes, miss; Sir Ralph made a mistake, as we know right well. She's quite well enough now for anything—has been this long time; but she's kept up the pretence of nerves and what not. I have no patience with her—that I haven't! She never went out with Sir Ralph all the time she was at Monty Carlo, and to-day she goes out stravaging with Mr. Carstairs and a couple of strangers for hours, and never so much as says, 'Bennett, if I'm not back in time, see that Miss Leyton has what she wants.'"

"It's abominable," said Georgie. "Get me some tea, there's a good Bennett. Is it very quiet here?"

As Georgie made herself at home, the boating party arrived. Vera came in first, followed by Anice and the others. Her own regret at having been uncourteous to one to whom she could only give politeness, made her welcome warmer than it might otherwise have been, and the day on the lake had done her much good. She had tried not to be a wet blanket to Anice and Charlie, and had ended by laughing with them.

"I am so sorry, Georgie," she said, with genuine apology; "you must have thought it strange that I let you arrive without even a message of welcome; but you see that proved my intention of being here. Do you know Miss Bentley? I am so sorry you found no one in."

"It's of no consequence at all," said

Georgie, in a tone that implied that it was.

"I daresay you'll get over it," broke in Charlie. "Did Finch bring my things from Milan?"

"If he did, he isn't here; he can't arrive till to-morrow."

"How's that?"

Georgie explained.

"What a nuisance!" grumbled the boy.
"I wanted my things."

"How did *you* manage?" said Vera.
"You have been doubly unfortunate, I am afraid."

Georgie replied in a dry tone that she had managed very well, but vouchsafed no further information.

Her manner to Vera was decidedly cold, and most unmistakably that of conscious

superiority. Had Vera been able to show resentment thus, it would have saved her from much aggression a year or two ago. Not in the least impressed by an amiability which, noticing, Georgie probably classed as weakness, she soon extinguished not only Vera's welcome, but her flicker of new animation. Georgie always treated younger girls with infinite disdain. Anice took a sudden dislike to her at first-sight, with which she found Charlie Carstairs fully sympathized. A boy too young, or a man not attracted by such a woman, always loathes her, however she avoids any vulgarity. With all her vulgar minor vices, with all her vulgar selfishness, with all her unrefined thoughts, Georgie Leyton was never apparently *vulgar*, though why she was not it would

have been hard to say. But if she were not vulgar she was frequently rude.

So it happened that after dinner Charlie Carstairs thought it of no use beginning to work then, and asked Vera to come out with him. She consented, if Georgie was not too tired. Georgie replied that she did not wish to go out; but that need not prevent Vera from doing so. To which Vera, nettled by the tone, replied rather curtly that very likely Georgie would prefer to rest alone.

"You seem to be stronger," said Georgie with a sneer.

"I am, thank you," Vera replied; and wrapping her cloak round her went out with Charlie. How her young brother-in-law also hated Georgie Vera now first understood.

"I say, Vera," said he, "why on earth did you let the Pussy cat come here? She's a perfect beast, and you know she hates you like the d—— I mean like poison. Why on earth do you let her come to you? She's no relation of yours; you may thank your stars for that."

"Why do you dislike her?" replied Vera, with a question more easily asked than she could have answered his demands.

"Oh, she's a pig," he said vaguely. "I say, isn't it jolly? The sort of dreaminess of the whole thing, you know, with the nightingales and the fireflies and all the proper sort of sceneries. I knew you'd like to get out of the way of all the people; and now we'll go down to the lake."

In effect he had taken her up through the woods behind the hotel, and now led

her by a narrow little path towards the darkened waters. The melody of the nightingales rose from the flickering trees, and the cool night air was laden with the scent peculiar to a Cadenabbian springtide night—a penetrating subtle perfume of white rose, magnolia, azalea and laurel, spreading wherever the breeze rose and fell on the quiet shore. The sturdy, apparently unsentimental, youth at her side was quite awake to those stray influences of beauty and sensitive to the soothing peacefulness of the scene. He did not fear to show it to his sister-in-law, but rather felt his words too rude—as indeed more poetic utterances than his have been—to express how that mystical loveliness affected even his careless nature.

They said very little as they walked.

"Are you tired?" he asked once.

"No, if we are not leaving Georgie alone too long."

"Bother Georgie! Now look at those fireflies," he interrupted.

They stopped to watch the little sparks of pale light above the lake. All was very still, only in the distance a little laughter, and nearer, footsteps passing.

"You like it?" said the boy, delighted to please his fair pale sister, for Charlie, without knowing it, was a little hungry for love; the Carstairs brothers had few or none belonging to them, except Georgie Leyton.

"Like it?" said Vera. "Thank you, Charlie. To-day has been very nice, and I owe it to your thought twice over. I am so glad to be here," she continued.

"It *is* jolly," he responded, and Vera knew that this meant full appreciation of the quiet loveliness they felt. "I wish people wouldn't come. Let's go on."

"I mustn't; I'm afraid of being tired. But you go. I can return by myself; you can get some one more amusing."

"A fellow doesn't always want humbug. Look here, Vera; I wish you'd remember I'm older than I was, and if Ralph is rusty you might tell me. I'm quite willing to stick up to him. I've told him already that you are a deal too good for him, and that he'd have a better time of it if he was half as civil to his own wife as to that beast Georgie."

Vera was nonplussed at this unexpected evidence of observation and execration on behalf of herself from careless Charlie.

" You shouldn't say such things. It is very good of you to think of me; but if you were a little older you would know that husband and wife must settle their own little quarrels. Of course, there should be none, but to you I can't deny them."

" I should think not!" ejaculated Charlie. " I don't call it quarrelling; I call it bullying, though."

" Who is coming along the road?" said Vera, to change the subject. " Any one you know?"

" It might be. But don't humbug, Vera. It's awfully serious. If you've got to live with Ralph you'll have to get the upper hand more than you've done; and you'll have to fight for it too. Now, look here, you can depend on some of us——"

" Charlie," said Vera, " I know you mean

well, and that you are a boy no longer," she hastened to add, "but you don't understand that there are some things which it is of no use talking of, and one of them is, how your brother is to be treated by his wife."

"Considering what I've seen of how his wife is treated by my brother, and that she has no one to stand up for her but——" He paused; then facing the new-comer, as Vera had her back to him, Charlie exclaimed: "By Jove! Meredith! How are you, old chap?"

Meredith, sauntering along with his cigarette, had paid no heed to the figures by the water's edge, and through the dusk, till he spoke, had not recognized Charlie Carstairs.

Vera heard the name, but it conveyed nothing to her, and she turned a little

further round that Charlie might speak, if he chose, to his friend.

Charlie, however, was determined to introduce Meredith, but as he attracted Vera's notice for the purpose she and Grey recognized each other.

Of course, Charlie saw nothing, but only that his introduction was unnecessary.

"Had I seen your face," Grey explained, "or, indeed, anything in this darkness and my unobservant mood, of course I should have asked you if you had forgotten Grey Winter. I have only been 'Meredith' for a year; it sounds as if I had done something of which I was ashamed that I have had to change my name; but I don't deserve to be cut yet, so far as I know."

The three paced on together in the still-

ness, and, lazily, and indifferently it appeared, Grey put his arm on Charlie's shoulder and put the youth on the other side of himself, as he walked by Vera. It was natural that he should wish to be between them, but so long as Charlie was there Grey Meredith only talked vague generalities, from which the boy gathered that they had not seen each other for a long time.

Not till the light of the hall fell on the trio could Grey see Vera's face, and note how the pretty childish girl had become a beautiful woman; not till then could Vera scan the face of the man whom she first had loved. She knew instantly, as women know, that she loved him no more, could never love him again; he felt, as men feel, suddenly an intense attraction.

After they parted, with some talk of the morrow and an invitation, not pressed, to come up then, Charlie rapidly, with warm respect, recounted his knowledge of Meredith, adding: "Anice Bentley pretends she isn't, but I'm sure she is, awfully gone on him; and you'll see how Georgie will try to make the running."

"You'd get on faster if you devoted some of your intellect to your books, my dear boy," said Vera; "you'll see too much—more than exists—soon, besides not passing your exam."

Charlie whistled then, and he made a face a little later, when, Vera remarked, for something to say, that they had had a lovely walk and had met Mr. Meredith as they returned. For Georgie answered: "Mr. Meredith was extremely attentive to

me as I came here, and I told him that he might call on me—on us—to-morrow.”

“Don’t correct yourself, Miss Puss,” replied Charlie. “‘*Me*’ shall have her visitors, ‘*me*’ shall; but if you had only happened to say before the last moment that you were going to stay with Lady Carstairs, he’d have told you that he came to Cadenabbia only to see her whom he had adored for years. Isn’t that true, Vera?”

He gave her the most open wink, as in sheer mischief he evolved this false statement, which came not far from the truth in some ways of which he had not the slightest idea.

“You are perfectly insufferable,” said Georgie, only believing that he was laughing at her.

“You don’t think so, do you, Vera?” he said, lolling about.

"Yes, Charlie, sometimes," she said gravely; and, somewhat to his own astonishment, Charlie felt that he was obliged to be quiet.



CHAPTER VI.

THE TABLES TURNED.

To Cadenabbia, which the Soul of Rest,
World-worn and weary, fashioned with delight,
'Mid bowers and glade beside the water's breast,
And hid, as happy birds conceal their nest,
'Neath hills that shield the secret of her flight.

Serbelloni.

THE weather was perfect that season, and the little party enjoyed it to the full. Out on the sunshiny lake; roaming through the shady woods; tracing in the cool of the day the mountain paths, with superb views of the serene harmonious loveliness on every hand; in the soft balmy evenings wandering where nightingales answered each other with notes of prolonged pain, followed by gladder melodies;—with sometimes one, sometimes another, as her com-

panion, Vera regained what she sorely needed, and had only temporarily lost, her calm courage and her superb beauty.

Georgie never made one of the little group unless it happened to comprise Grey Meredith, and never, save by accident, was away if he were of the party; she found her own friends and joined them—her place being taken by Anice Bentley, an arrangement which pleased every one. Day by day Anice grew into Vera's affections, and the girl's soul was laid open before her—even to the secret which, the chaff of Charlie aside, she thought was sacred to herself.

That Anice should make Vera her confidante was not unnatural. But Vera marvelled that she had in some way returned the confidence by speaking not of herself

but of that Vera Ludlow who had loved, as Anice Bentley did now, an ideal Grey —such a Grey Meredith as never existed in this world.

About a mile from Cadenabbia is a little square, grass-grown and walled in on the side overlooking the lake, and on that opposite closed by a little church, and villa walls covered with wisteria and white roses. On the square children were playing; the elder pretending to read like the priest as he had catechised them that Sunday afternoon, the younger tumbling on the sward formed by the grass which hid the stones supposed to pave the public place of Grianti.

Below the wall crickets chirped with great vigour in the long flower-mingled grass, bending in the soft wind and shining green

or silver, yellow or brown, as the breeze was strong enough to affect this or that portion of the varied vegetation of the field. And all around an atmosphere of peace and beauty; the purple tints strongest in the afternoon light, and the expanse above, the clear-cut heights, the verdant shores, the pale lake; entering into the vision of the two young Englishwomen who sat gazing on the beauty that quiet Sunday. They would always remember that afternoon. It was the day on which their friendship became certain, though companionship and even intimacy had existed since the first moment of meeting.

They had been talking of other matters, and somehow Grey Meredith's name was mentioned. An impulse then caused Vera to say plainly:

“You do care for Grey, then?”

Anice took the question as it was asked—no liberty, but with the right of friendship, and as knowing that there was confidence between them; nor would Vera have asked the question, the answer being certain, had she not perceived that the girl was in need of help—no fear of putting that into her head which was not there already! Nevertheless, Anice naturally answered by silence for a moment, and then a whispered, “I can’t help it; I know it’s wrong.”

She poked at the intrusive grass peeping between the stones of the Place with some embarrassment, and there was silence for a moment so far as the English were concerned, while the children laughed at their own sports and a goat from the neighbouring house came out to see what was

going on. Received by the children with too vigorous delight, the animal probably regretted that she had come forward.

"I don't think it is wrong at all," said Vera. "But I am very sorry that you should think of Grey in this way."

"He doesn't know it," said Anice.

"I should hope not," replied Vera. "You must never let him know it, and by-and-by you'll change your mind."

"I?" said Anice, with surprise.

"Yes, you—you also," said Vera with emphasis. "I don't think it is the least wrong so long as you keep it to yourself that you should care for Grey or any other man; but I think it is foolish in this case."

Anice was taken aback by these words from Vera. She had not expected Vera to be so lacking in sentiment.

Vera continued: "I daresay you think me very hard, and want none of the old platitudes from me. Wiser people would tell you these: a 'bad' man may abuse a woman's affection for him, and even a 'good' man can't resist confusing her admiration with his complacency; but as for the grey man—I mean no pun—the average man, neither white nor black, he's sorry to know of unsought affection just in proportion as he's worthy of it. You already know all that. But, dear, I don't want you to make for yourself a trouble, if you haven't made it already."

"I wish I hadn't," said Anice in a low tone, answering Vera's sweet smile rather than her somewhat severe words.

"I am afraid you have. I have been thinking of it ever since I noticed this in

you. No; don't be afraid. You have done nothing wrong. I was wondering how I could say what I should like to, and I think it will be best to speak straightforwardly. I can trust you, dear, I am sure. The reason that made me quicker to notice that you cared for Grey than I should have been was this: I used to care for him as you do now. It seems so strange to me."

"You *used* to care for him, Lady Carstairs?" said Anice.

"Call me Vera, dear, if you will. Don't make any mistake. I did care for him when I was your age. I dreamt of him; I thought of him; I cried about him—five years ago. And now I like him very much, but that is all. I am thankful that I did not marry him."

"Why did you not?" asked Anice simply.

Vera's cheek coloured. "For this one reason: he did not ask me to marry him. No, looking back, I see that Grey did not behave well. He was only three-and-twenty, and not very wise, and I was very foolish at nineteen. I was very miserable. I thought it would have been so much easier to bear parting from him if he had said it was hard for him, as it was, that I know. And I *know* now that Grey did care for me then. I thought it at the time, and I had reason to, Anice; yet he did not care for me enough to trust the future for us both. He should have gone away sooner if he had meant to go away at all. Yet, as it turned out, it did no harm."

All this had been said in a low tone, as if any one could hear, in little quick abrupt sentences.

"It is strange," said Anice, in a grave voice.

"It is strange," echoed Vera. "Now let us talk of something else."

"Only this," said Anice with hesitation. "Does he—do you know if he does—care for any one else? Perhaps it would be easier to—not *think* if one knew. I can't see why he should care for me. I am sure he doesn't and won't care for me—ever—but——"

"If Grey should ever take it into his head to care for you, you'll soon find it out; till then—as, indeed, in any case—I should make up my mind to do without him. No fear that you will not have enough of

love in your day," said Vera, looking at the attractive face.

"It comes to every one, I suppose, in the right way. Do you think so?" asked Anice a little eagerly. "Do things go wrong only because people are stupid? And do *you* believe in love—I mean as something—"

Anice did not finish her sentences that day, nor was Vera inclined to take up her work. Vera was then for the first time suddenly conscious that no real love had ever come to her, or had ever passed from herself.

"Look," she said, as two figures emerged from behind a wall bounding the path from Cadenabbia to Grianti; "we are not to have our walk alone, after all. Here are Grey and Charlie."

A view halloo from Charlie startled the natives, and the two mad young Englishmen bounded across the *place*, and Charlie leapt on to the wall, leaning against Vera back to back, with his legs stretched out, whilst, a little more decorously, Grey Meredith sat down beside Anice, and a fire of small talk began.

"This fellow," grumbled Charlie, "has no idea at all of a Christian Sabbath. I was enjoying a peaceful *siesta* under the white roses, when up he trots, routs me about, so that for very life's sake I was forced to come along with him. Where do you think he wants to go to? Up there!"

Charlie pointed to a little speck on a hill beyond.

"It's a curious sort of church," explained

Grey; "but I don't think I care for it now. It's rather too far, after all. There's a church here, you know, amply sufficient for my purposes." He pointed across the road.

"Come, I say," expostulated Charlie, "you're going up there, you know. You've wound me up to it, and I'm a regular machine; there'd be an alarming accident if all that energy you put into me wasn't expended."

"You see, the effort of inspiring you was so great that it has taken all my energy."

"Fudge! Come along, you lazy beggar."

"He has no respect for his senior. I wish you'd teach him better manners, Anice," said Grey. "Why don't you ask Miss Bentley to take you up there, if you must go, and won't go alone? I'm not going, that's flat."

Charlie, with his back to the present

company, suddenly twisted his neck round in some fashion peculiar to himself, made an astounding face at Grey over Vera's shoulder, then stretching his legs along the wall performed the feat of getting up without bending them, and began to dance a break-down on the stone. Pretending to stop and rest for support on Vera's shoulder he jumped as far as he could on to the *place*, chivied the children and the goat, and swung a child up above his head, to the small boy's fear, astonishment and delight. Finally, he brought up before the trio who had been watching him, and with sudden gravity stood erect for a second. Drawing his heels together, and with a bow which in its sweep brought his head into Grey's face, Charlie asked :

“Would mademoiselle be so very gracious as to accompany her humble servitor on a perilous mission to unknown and unattempted heights? It is of no use to ask madame to make the ascent—it is too *pénible*, but will not mademoiselle, who being an angel will doubtless have wings——”

“Silly boy! Would you care to go, Anice? I am afraid it is too far for me, even now, but I will tell the others that I have sent you to take care of Charlie.”

“Come on, if you’re coming,” said Charlie.
“Come on, Meredith; don’t be so idle.”

But though Vera told him to go, and that she had had enough both of walking and of the society of other people for the time, and would like to be alone, Grey passively refused to stir. Perhaps

Anice had hoped that he would go. In any case she liked the walk, and liked Charlie Carstairs well enough, and she would not have shown that she preferred to remain where Grey was if he stayed; so she went with Charlie, and Grey, Meredith and Vera Carstairs were alone on the little *place* at Grianti.

The children trooped away just at this time, and save for a peasant woman who knelt at the iron-barred window of the church opposite, there was no one but themselves, and they spared to break the silence.

Never now keenly conscious of his presence, though always with some pleasure in his society, Vera began to dream as nature-lovers will dream when alone, or with those whose tastes are sympathetic

Her soul was not formalizing thoughts, but floating away into a mystical atmosphere in which was felt and idealized the sunshine above, the colour around, and the very stillness—a stillness of all but the tiny, usually unperceived sounds of small insect beings, of wind scarcely stirring, of running water; these are dreams in which the soul makes for itself an ante-room to Heaven in realizing the Beautiful of earth.

Grey Meredith was not in heaven, nor realizing the Beautiful in the abstract; he was in torment—the more because he had the Beautiful at his side:

“A being breathing thoughtful breath,
A traveller betwixt life and death . . .
And yet a spirit still, and bright,
With something of an angel light.”

He watched her, nor appreciated the compliment of her unconcern at his pre-

sence. He noted each movement of her graceful figure, and tried to read the secret of those dreaming eyes, but there was nothing for him. And yet a few years before, when she had not known how rare is love—when, if he might have had less to give, she had required less, perchance *then* Vera Ludlow's eyes had not concealed their secret from him. And knowing from others' scandal (and confirming the story in view of her own reticence) something about her husband, Grey knew no reason why she should be indifferent to him now. What he wanted he scarcely knew—no wrong, but the right, for love always seems right to the lover.

“Vera!” he said softly, as the silence continued.

She opened wider her dark eyes as if waking from a happy dream, but with no answering look to his intense gaze; she had not quite come back to earth. "Is it not beautiful here?" she exclaimed.

"Vera!" he said again, and at the vibration of that tone Vera Carstairs awoke to the knowledge that it was his turn to feel love for her.



CHAPTER VII.

MANIFESTOS.

Oh ! a crime will do
As well, I reply, to serve for a text,
As a virtue golden through and through . . .
You of the virtue—(we issue join)—
How strive you ? *De te fabula.*

The Statue and the Bust.—BROWNING.

QUITE quietly, as if she had not been suddenly startled, though in an instant the straight path by which they had come to this point was retraced by memory, Vera rose from her seat on the square, and Grey rose also.

His face was working—the slowly-moved, good-looking face, which masked all expression so cleverly in society ; his hand, half stretched out as if to detain her,

trembled; and Vera felt his excitement. But, not answering to his mood, it terrified her—or would have done had it been any one else but Grey; with him it made her sad.

“I was beginning to be happy, and have I done this to *him*,” she thought quickly. “No! he shall say nothing—that is best.” And aloud she continued: “Are you going on? I am thinking of going back to the hotel. Even now, you see, I am not fit for more than a certain amount of walking.”

She said this in a careless tone.

“And whose fault is it?” broke in Grey hotly. “Charlie Carstairs told me last night a few facts about his brother’s treatment of you that were enough to make any man’s blood boil.”

"Then," said Vera with dignity, "if Charlie was so young and so wanting in respect for me, as to talk of what he fancies he sees in his brother's conduct to the first-comer, you encourage him."

"I am no first-comer, Vera," answered Grey as sternly; "nor do I wish for information about you from any other being but yourself. Not a word wanting in respect to you passed Charlie's lips; of myself even you *dare* not think dishonourably. Don't you know—speak the truth—don't you *know* that I love you."

Facing her—one hand on hers now, as if to compel her to face him, to stay with him, to answer him—Grey Meredith waited her answer. "You know it," he repeated with sternness as if she had been a culprit from whom he had to extort a confession.

“Vera, you know my love for you?
Answer.”

She tried to know what was best to say. Vera had never the saving instinct of coquetry, and she only told the truth at length: “I begin to be afraid that it is so, Grey.”

Her low musical tone had no effect on his anger. “You are afraid,” he said. “What harm does it do you if I am miserable? What do you care? You need not delude yourself; I am tired of the pretence of friendship; it is pretence—arrant humbug—on my side.”

“I am sorry to hear that; I thought I had a friend in you,” she answered, trying to smile; anything to divert the oppressive force brought to bear on her.

“You have; worse or better as it pleases

you," he continued ; " I am no friend if friendship excludes love."

" Then be my friend," she said quickly, " if love includes friendship. Listen to me, Grey. You have said you love me; is it true ? "

" Is it true ? " he answered contemptuously. " As true as that we stand here, and," he continued bitterly, " as true as that you care nothing for me. Would you like me to indulge in a few poetical asseverations ? Shall I prove that the sun is shining upon us now—is that true ? I had no intention of raving like a lunatic, but as I have begun you may hear me out. I am no more going to annoy you than I am going to leave you ; if seeing you with others does not drive me mad I shall be with you constantly ; you shall

give me all you can and know that my whole life, all I do, am and think, is yours and only yours for ever! That's all, Vera."

He had let go the touch upon her arm, and they moved onward slowly together across the little *place*; they came to the door where the publication of intended marriages flutter against the notices of duties on corn, the regulation of the prices of bread; they passed together down the little narrow way by the church and through the spring-garlanded lanes. Neither spoke; not from further embarrassment but from the feeling that something had been said to which there was no reply; together they were silent.

" You know now," he said at length—they were then walking between two hedges full of spring freshness, clad in delicate verdure

—“you know to what you have to trust—to my devotion ; it shall never do you hurt, Vera ; it shall never weary you, but there it is. Years ago we knew each other, and though there have been women for whom I have had a fancy, I swear to you that you were my first love in time, as you are first and foremost in my soul. I was foolish, an utter fool. I tried to shut my eyes to the result of that summer holiday, pretending to myself that I did not care, trying to persuade myself that you did not care ; well, if you had aught against me, you are avenged, Vera, in this. You will not make my punishment too hard ?”

“Grey, don’t you think that it would be better for you not to see me for a time ?” she suggested.

He laughed bitterly. "Not much use in that at this time of day. Perhaps if you had cared also it might have been my duty to exile myself again. As it is, I should be none the better and you all the worse for that. You may see through me now, but however much you undervalue me, you will have one on whom you can depend in your life. Oh! Vera, why did you not wait for me?"

"How did I know that you wished it?" she said quickly. "Let us not go back to the past; it is done with. I shall value your loyal friendship very highly, Grey; friends are what I need most in my life, and then, by-and-by, I hope that you will find some nice girl for your wife."

"I dislike girls, especially as wives *in*

posse. Who would you like me to marry? You had better complete the cure of my little illusion; you haven't enough interest in me even to keep me as an odd retainer," he said, switching off the heads of the green nettles.

"I haven't selfishness enough. You'd make another woman happy."

"Hang it! who wants unselfishness in the woman he's fond of?" rejoined Grey impatiently, taking her literally as if she had meant to claim the quality she spoke of.

"I hope that Charlie will not go too far for Anice Bentley," remarked Vera as a sign she had had enough. "Isn't it getting late?"

"Not very," said Grey, taking her hint that the conversation must change. "Anice

is a pretty little thing and as good as gold. I've known them all for ages, and used to go and have school-room tea with Anice. I'm so glad you like her; I'm very fond of her."

"Poor Anice!" thought Vera, "how utterly hopeless! That he should care for me is not so fatal as that avowal that he is very fond of her. Fancy my arriving at only being 'very fond' of Grey, and that's just what it is."

However, after all, Grey's declaration seemed to have cleared the air and to have broken down all barriers of reserve. Having made the assertion that he was not her *friend* he was content so to be, and they glided into talk which if not general was at least not tragic, and Grey was happy and Vera satisfied. Arrived at home

they found every one still out, and Vera and he were alone in the salon. He lingered as if he did not wish to part from her, and she did not bid him go. There was a pathetic look in his eyes which touched her heart.

No one came in, and it was perhaps to show how she really accepted him as a friend that then, for the first time, Vera spoke to him of little Daisy, and showed him the photograph, which after Georgie's arrival had been taken to her own room. Thence she fetched it. Silent as to the scene which preceded it; silent as to the blame justified by her husband's conduct, the story as she told it was touching enough, and Grey listened to it with reverence. Somehow the recital seemed to solemnize him. He had thought his respect

for her womanhood had already been perfect; now something more seemed to ennable her, in her motherhood of the little child that was dead. He even perceived that with Vera motherhood had been a passion, and that if the real child had been beloved, the ideal image always with her was adored.

He was deeply touched by the pathos of words and looks, but he resented—for he was only a man, a very ordinary common-place man—her devotion to this pure white image in her soul, when he was longing, wrongly it might be, to see her flush at the discovery of love, rosy, warm and living, at her very side. But she—thinking that he now was all engrossed with her thoughts instead of all engrossed by thoughts of her—she held out her hand

in sympathy. She wanted thereby to seal the compact of their friendship, and felt that she was honouring him in doing this before her shrine.

He did not misunderstand her, but he was too weak to struggle with himself, and as she gave him her hand, and he came nearer still, suddenly bent forward, and would have touched her forehead with his burning lips; but before he had neared the white brow below the soft silky dark hair, Vera started back. Yet she did not resent it more than momentarily; his pleading look apologized for him, before he said, "I had thought this once, for auld lang syne, Vera."

She remembered that once he had kissed her before—a kiss that had for one day made her happy, and for years miserable.

That he could think so little of her as to kiss her thus and then to go away without the words spoken that she should have heard first, but then supposed a mere form. She coloured now to think of herself then, and, though there was no disrespect in manner or tone, the vivid remembrance of the past might have made her take a dislike to Grey had not Georgie entered to establish a reaction in his favour.

For the memory had come like a lightning flash, and Georgie had entered at her blush, saw Grey a little discomposed—he usually self-possessed to a fault—saw Vera close by him with the rare vivid colour in her face, saw the photograph on the table. Georgie thought she took in the situation at a glance, and contrived to be so significant in saying nothing, that Grey made

an abrupt exit to crown a stupid embarrassment for which he could find no excuse to himself a little later. It was one of the exceptional awkwardnesses of a man of the world.

But Georgie had subtly made the most of it. Then she blundered too. Instead of being content with her position, which was as impregnable as indescribable, she pursued the enemy too far.

As soon as Grey had gone she said rather insolently, "You were having an interesting talk when I came in; but don't you think it is rather a pity to bore a young man with family histories? I don't know, of course."

Vera had often let speeches pass that would have deserved rebuke, so that Georgie did not often even trouble herself

to be cleverly rude; but Vera was a little highly-wrought and now spoke her mind.

Vera's slight tall form stood above Georgie as the girl lounged in the long chair on the balcony. They had both gone out there as Grey left. The soft calm of the evening sky, where the moon floated above the Varenna hills, was behind her, and at the first tones of her voice Georgina Leyton looked at her and had to listen.

"No; I think you do not know what any one should do, Georgina. You have a greater want of knowledge of that sort than any one I ever met with."

Georgie gazed at Vera, utterly astounded. Had she believed Vera capable of upbraiding her, she never would have sup-

posed Vera to have attacked her *savoir faire*; but Vera had found a weak spot, and Georgie was so astonished that she could not interrupt her successfully.

"It is quite time that we came to an understanding. Very foolishly I have allowed myself to drift into a wrong position, and have permitted your insolence on occasions when, even for your sake, I should not have done so. Do not interrupt me. I am extremely sorry to speak now, but it is better to do so."

The words flowed from her lips very quietly and easily, and Georgie bit her lips, rose from her lounging attitude, sat down again on the side of her chair, and fidgeted with her parasol.

"Yes," Georgie said, "you can take *this* new departure also in your husband's

absence; there is a good deal going on which is novel."

"So much the better," rejoined Vera. "I will pardon you for the past, but for the future remember that I am Ralph's wife—if you wish me to remember that you are Ralph's cousin and not merely an ignorant, irresponsible mischief-maker whom I should not receive if she called to see me."

"You think that you could shut me out?" said Georgie with brilliant colour in her cheeks. "Ralph would sooner turn you away than me."

This was no sooner said than she repented of it, and she had swallowed down many more truths rather worse to say, such as that Ralph saw her ten times abroad for once at his own house.

Vera took no notice of this, but continued : "I have written to my husband and told him that I am now quite strong enough to undertake the money matters which I find were entrusted to you."

Georgie started.

"Eustace informed me that Sir Ralph had told him to go to Miss Leyton for orders and for money. It was kind of you to undertake this trouble, and I told the courier that it was quite right. However, for the future he can come to me."

"Ralph gave you power to draw for him ? I am afraid even if I give up the cheque-book to you it would be of no use, the account is in my name. You see he wished to save you trouble," said Georgina.

Vera had had a small sum sent to her

for her private expenses, and the courier had been told to pay for everything, and for any purchases; just as in London, she might have what bills she liked, but had rarely five pounds in cash. Vera had supposed that the courier had received money direct from Sir Ralph, and that day had accidentally discovered that Georgie had control of these accounts and drew the weekly cheques. Had Sir Ralph intended this as a deliberate insult? or had he so arranged matters that the ostensible hostess should be in the power of her guest should any *contretemps* occur?

“Yes,” said Vera bravely; “I know that I have been glad to have no trouble in such matters for some time, but in this and other ways there will be from henceforth a change.”

Leaving Georgie meditating some reply, Vera went to the balustrade of the balcony and leant over it, letting the twilight cool play on her heated cheeks as the lime-scented air refreshed her. She was hailed by Charlie and Anice just below, coming in after their walk.

"Who's that?" said Georgie, who did not think it convenient to quarrel with Vera then.

"Charlie and Anice," said Vera. Then, for she was one of those natures who always spoil their own strong assertions by being sorry for their effect on others, Vera again astonished Georgie by adding: "Charlie is coming up, and we have done with this subject. But, Georgie, I have cause to dislike you, yet I do not know why you have given it to me?"

Would you not be happier if you tried to let me be your friend? I am sorry for you, and I would try to help you if you let me."

Before Georgie could reply Charlie entered.



CHAPTER VIII.

ASIDES.

"It takes something else besides 'cuteness to make folk see what'll be their interest in the long run. It takes some conscience and belief in right and wrong—I see that pretty clear."—*Adam Bede*.—GEORGE ELIOT.

SINGLE heavy drops of rain against the window; wind in gusts at long intervals; dust in spasms; and the lake parti-coloured beneath the dreary-looking mountains; all cold and colourless, and telling of approaching storm.

Vera Carstairs and Georgie Leyton were both writing letters—both writing to the same man. Vera, slowly and deliberately on black-edged paper, in neat even letters, with large capitals, stops in their places, and sentences formalized by anxiety;

Georgie, in a scrawl of much character, letters running about round each other and into the next words, on red paper with torn edges, and regardless of what she said in the certainty of pleasing the receiver; no stops at all, frequent dashes at uncertain intervals, plenty of underlining and notes of exclamation. Neither of these women did themselves justice in their letters: Vera, because she was nervous—one can have a fit of shyness in writing a letter; Georgie, because she rarely was able to get any of her wit and certainly could get nothing of her will upon paper.

This is part of Vera's letter:

"I must thank you for letting me stay here so long; it has done me a great deal of good in more ways than I can name. I hope now to be strong enough to be of

some use to you, though you must not expect too much from me. What may seem a long time to you is in one respect a very short time to me, though indeed it is years, I think, since last October. For the last time—unless you should wish it—I speak of *that*, because for the first time I am able to say that for your share in making that great sorrow (though you never intended that terrible consequence) *I do forgive you, Ralph.* In return, will you not try to be a little more tender to me? I know that I am young and inexperienced, and unfitted for the difficult part which you say your wife should play; but if you tried to teach me what you wished more gently and more lovingly, don't you think it would be easier for us both? I wanted to die last winter

because it was so hard to live; but I had to get well, and it is so terrible to think that all our lives—for years perhaps—we should have to live as we have done for the last two years. Am I foolish in writing this? I think not. Ralph! forgive me for my share in our estrangement. I will try to help you. Will you not try to help your loving wife, VERA CARSTAIRS."

With tears in her eyes, and trembling all over in her excitement, glad that Georgie had her back to her, Vera drew the sealing apparatus towards her, and was fastening up the letter when Anice Bentley entered. She came in quietly as she had been in the habit of doing, but as Vera looked up she perceived that something was wrong, though the girl moved and spoke with perfect composure.

"Can I speak to you?" said Anice.
"It doesn't matter if you are busy."

"No; I have finished. Come into my room. No, thanks, Georgie; don't move. In any case I wanted to show Anice my shopping of blankets at San Giovanni."

Georgie did not wish to move, so they left her in the salon, and she finished her note to Ralph Carstairs in some content; then, rising, went to the balcony, and apparently excited by what she saw, returned indoors, put on toque and new-market, and braved the gale now whistling round the house. This had been part of her letter:

"Why on earth *should* you expect a letter every day, or, if it comes to that, every *week*? I have absolutely **NOTHING** to say. Are you interested in the moon-

light manœuvres of some bread-and-butter wives with *half-willing* swains, in the troops of tourists who ebb and flow, leaving a permanent remainder of *frumps* luggaged with *awful* trunks of nailed wood and antediluvian relics of the carpet bag period? As for more regular residents like ourselves, they are perfectly uninteresting, including Vera's *devoted* worshipper, Anice Bentley, whom Vera prefers to me! But fancy choosing to idealize a *woman!* Vera has, however, developed a whole set of Arcadian ideas. I envy the *result*, which seems to be *happiness* greater than she has known for some time, but can't quite sympathize with the *means!* I answer your last letter—‘Write: anything interests me from you’—by giving you a dose of Vera. (A storm is coming on, and

I have nothing to do!) Have I ever written so much about Vera before? (such a storm, and there's a small boat out on the lake trying to cross; I expect we shall have a *sensation* before it gets in. I wonder whether it *ever* will? What a horrid idea!) I continue in preference—*toujours* Vera! At this moment *her* strongest passion is, I *think*, for this pretty but rather absurd child; yet I was *a little* startled to find that *evidently* she had been AT LEAST a *friend* of your acquaintance, *Grey Meredith*. You always said that if she had not particularly cared for you she had cared for *no one else*. How can *any* man know *even that* in the case of the youngest woman, and Vera was over nineteen when you married her? But I'll let you off *Vera* as chief subject, sub-divisions into

these three heads—Anice Bentley, Grey Meredith, and her sketching from nature, which is really a combination of the other two elements. I am going to see those mariners shipwrecked. *How* rough the lake is! Thanks very much for POSTAGE STAMPS. After this stupid letter is posted there will be a balance of £4 19s. $9\frac{1}{2}d.$, which I shall use somehow!! You are good, after all.

“Your affectionate Pussy.”

An unliterary epistle, looking better in the disguise of MS. than in the all-revealing garb of print; for print levels all the little feminine flourishes, and exposes the disconnected periods to public gaze; yet even thus in the given passages illustrating something of the writer's nature, and casting a light on the habits of the husband

who received, of the woman who wrote, such comments on his wife.

The two letters were laid together on arrival in England, and the last was read first. The Pussy's scratch at Vera's friendship for Grey Meredith, with the further insinuation, scarcely did much damage by itself; but, like many an obstinate man unreasonably swayed by the esteem in which others held his own possessions, Sir Ralph Carstairs was influenced by the contempt expressed in the description of Vera. Was he ever angry at such freedom? The freedom was only the natural result of his own disloyalty, and Georgie's daring the result of her downfall.

Reading this letter first in the handwriting of the woman whom he fought

with and had struggled from, with respect for her *grip*, even five years before ; reading it with vivid memory of her mockery and with full power to give life to the disjointed sentences ; reading it with all the suggestiveness which a letter from such a woman carries to such a man in spite of all possible defects of style, information and taste ; Sir Ralph lingered over the sheet, disliked it thoroughly, and read it over again with pleasure. He was more than usually irritated with her, but still it was a letter from her, albeit he had had to bribe her for it with what they had euphoniously called postage stamps.

Next—set against his wife by the fact that she was not Georgie, though that fact had not been the fault of Georgie, nor in

becoming his wife had Vera been entirely to blame—Sir Ralph Carstairs opened the second Italian letter.

He did not expect to be much interested in it, but the vein in which it was couched was novel. Something in it struck him, and if he had been sensitive he would have felt its pathos.

As it was he read this letter again, and his indifferent contempt passed into a certain amount of wonder.

Perhaps, however, the plea only achieved the honour of being considered, and of fathering the remark he made to a friend a little later, *& propos* of some one else: “She is sorry that there is an estrangement, is she? Probably she’s in the sentimental stage of love with another fellow; a woman’s always soft then, even

to the other man she's injuring; at least she tries to be."

Putting the appeal in this light and connecting it with the insinuation of Georgie (not made for the first time, though for the first time relating to anterior relations between Vera and Grey), Sir Ralph Carstairs felt himself justified in not paying the smallest attention to the letter of his wife. If those words, written in such fire, received with such coldness, had otherwise had power to touch him, again Georgie Leyton's influence of personality and of *persiflage* had counteracted hers of pathos and loyalty. Very likely it would have made no difference to Vera if Georgie had never written in idleness as much as in malice; but as it was, not jealously but self-excusingly, Carstairs

from thenceforward believed in his wife's affection for Grey Meredith.

Meanwhile, having traced those letters to their destination, let us return to the writers, on the stormy day on which the words went from Lake Como.

As soon as Anice had safely shut the door into Vera's room, and Vera, seeing that she wished it, had locked them in, the girl clasped her hands and let her self-control be set aside.

"I had to come to you," faltered Anice. "You won't—— Oh! how horrible! Oh, Vera, listen!"

Anice shuddered. The wind swept by with a howl, and for a second the girl kept still, with all the colour gone from her face and her frame trembling to Vera's touch.

"What is it, dear? Tell me," said Vera gently; "I hear nothing but the wind."

"Look!" said Anice, drawing her to the window of the bedroom, yet keeping within the room. The half window-frame was open. The wind passed again and clapped the *persienne* to. Seeing Vera attempt to push it back, Anice went through the opening, fastened it against the wall, and then, returning, shut the window. As she had finished:

"You mustn't catch cold," said the girl, in a dull tone. "Oh, help me from going mad! Hide me!" she suddenly added. "Tell me *what* to do. Look!" she said again; all this in a tone of suppressed agony.

Vera looked. That Anice was in her senses and in great trouble Vera had no

doubt, but what had her suppressed grief to do with the stormy lake and the rising wind? There was no one on the balcony, nothing but storm on the darkened heaving waters. That was all she saw in the direction to which the girl pointed. Nothing, yet Anice still repeated, "Look!"

"I see nothing, darling," said Vera gently. "Tell me what it is."

"Nothing—you see nothing?" said the girl hoarsely. "Let me look. No. Thank God! It is there still. Look, Vera. *Don't you see the boat?*"

Vera strained her eyes, and she saw at last, rising and falling, sometimes visible, sometimes sinking beneath the rolling waves, even as viewed from their elevation at the window, a little boat. Danger to the safety of any boat on that great cold

gusty lake would have been apparent to the most ignorant, and both had heard only a day or two before tales told of lives lost on the then smiling inland sea in sudden squall or gradually rising storm.

It was the only speck on the angry surface, the little lake-boat on the giant sea-like rollers.

“Who is there?” whispered Vera, but scarcely needed to hear the answer between the girl’s bloodless lips :

“It is Grey Meredith—and two sailors!”

No more words were needed between the two women in this. Anice was suddenly a woman. Vera comprehended. The girl, who had no right to show more than ordinary anxiety for the man who knew not nor would have wished to know her

love for him, had come to Vera in her double trouble of mind.

Vera understood it all—the agony of anxiety intensified by the impossibility of either repressing or expressing it—understood the instinct which brought Anice to her: to have fellowship in suffering and to be shielded from self-betrayal in the safety of Vera's presence, ere yet her growing terror should carry her beyond herself. Vera understood in an instant what has taken long enough to indicate — all the threads of torture woven round the delicate girlish soul: a girl's heart, like the rose first opening, ever tossed by the wind, held firmly in its beauty by the cup which had controlled and shielded its budding. Not till the rose has known more of storm and of sunshine do those mantlings of reserve

abandon the soft petals and permit the display of the luscious heart within. The instinct of reserve, so strong and beautiful in such a girl, was not swept away by the storm of passionate anxiety; its consciousness did not prove that she suffered less than if she had wholly abandoned herself; nay, as Vera knew, that rightful self-control implied great suffering, and won from her respect for the young soldier under the first fire on love's battlefield.

So little was then said between them. Anice could not even bear the touch of her friend's hand. Vera gave her the glasses, following with her own eyes the speck growing slowly larger and larger, yet ever and anon vanishing for a second in some gulf of cold and cruel sea. At such times Anice would quiver

from head to foot, and blood dropped from her lip once, as she bit it through trying not to scream.

They could not be saved by others. No other boat could live if that could not. If it weathered the storm, well; if not——

“They are in God’s hands, Anice darling,” murmured Vera, as she thought that all was over.

They were nearer now. With the glasses Anice could distinguish the figures in the little boat, could see how the waves rolled it along as it lay sideways in the trough or on the height. Those boats do not confront the waves; and the uncertain gusts of wind added to the danger. It could not have been greater.

“Let me have the glass, dear,” said

Vera, and when reluctantly it had been given she kept it in spite of the girl's impatience. Then she put it down. "Dearest, I don't think you should look any more. You are brave; but this is too awful for you to bear. We can do nothing but wait, and, perhaps, in His mercy, God will bring them to the haven where they would be."

The beautiful old words came so naturally to Vera's lips. Yet Anice, looking up at the lovely pale face beside her, feeling the gentle arms put round her, knew that Vera had no thought that Grey Meredith and the sailors could ever reach an earthly haven, but that the girl was not to be allowed to watch any more lest she should only see the struggle of the strong swimmers "in their agony."

"My poor, poor child!" said Vera; but Anice felt rigid in her arms.

"All is not over! I know they can send no one, or I wouldn't have come here. But isn't it a little calmer? Won't they be a little sheltered? And they have gone so long through the worst. See, they are not so far off! I *must* look! Don't be afraid; if they get through I shall be none the worse; if not——"

She had never spoken so much before, though never had she been so near to losing that self-control.

Vera forebore to press her. Love must have its way, and was it not to be able to indulge in its sorrow that this young love had sought her side?

And so, from henceforth, during fifteen minutes more, the two women watched in

silence. For the first part of the time it seemed impossible that the boat could ever keep its broadside above the pursuing waters; then the worst was over, but at any moment the boat might still have been swamped; and then, at last, Anice turned to her friend with a pitiful appeal in her eyes, and Vera whispered: "I think so; they have got into the sheltered water now."

And in a minute or two more: "Yes; they are safe."



CHAPTER IX.

COUNTER IRRITATION.

“And life’s fine loyalties are turned to jest.”—*Austin Dobson*

TREMBLING herself with the reaction, Vera felt Anice, fainting, fall against her. She called no one, and soon the girl came to herself, and very quickly the colour came back.

“Be brave now,” said Vera firmly, “Grey Meredith is quite safe. I will send to your people and say that I want you to stay with me. I know Georgie is going to dine downstairs, and then to have a walk with some of her friends; so we shall be alone.”

Anice looked up at her, half comprehen-

hending the quiet matter-of-fact tone, half resenting it. Had Vera herself felt nothing?

Vera left her time to think this out; then, knowing the nerves of the girl must be unhinged, she went on with kind cruelty:

“Remember, dear, no one must ever know of our watch here but ourselves; you are not one whit nearer to Grey Meredith because his danger has given you all this pain.”

Again Anice looked up, almost angrily, a light in her bright young eyes; then, covering her face with her hands for a moment, she answered Vera, in a voice to which emotion only added sweetness, very quietly and very touchingly:

“I know it.”

Vera turned away for a second. Her

own eyes were filling with tears, not bitter, but in sweet sympathy this time; she respected Anice, and knew that to her she need say nothing more. All she could do was to gain time for her to recover before others saw her. To-morrow the Bentleys were going back to town, and for the future Anice must take her chance, as other women do. She would doubtless often see Grey Meredith as before, but so long as she was not put to the test at that moment, her dignity would doubtless be sufficient.

"Will you please me, Anice? Rest here on the sofa a little."

"Yes," said the girl. "Only would you, if you don't catch cold, just see if he has landed safely?"

Vera again comprehended. Only from the

balcony it could be seen if the boat had got to the landing-stage, and Anice did not want to go out there.

It was calmer now, and the rain had blown over; the grey scudding clouds were shining with light, and the wind, shifting round, now brought odours of the white banksias and limes; the lake here and there fretted with silver, and the colour passing again over the hills. The lake surged so that the splash of the rollers was heard, sea-like, on the stone wall and on the steps in front, and at the side came murmurs of the leaves and distant songs of birds. People began to go out, only one or two; but there were a few below the balcony over which Vera leant. The itinerant merchants near the landing-stage on the approach of the storm had

folded away their wares and now were unpacking, and the boatmen chatted without fear of missing fares. Under the fresh green avenue beyond the roses, Vera could not quite see the boat-steps on the little breakwater; but as she looked she saw a scarlet petticoat beneath a black coat and a scarlet knot in a small hat, beyond the men.

Recognizing Georgie's dress, in another minute Vera perceived that Grey Meredith was there also. She returned to Anice. "Yes, he's all right; don't move."

Catching up a scarf, she threw it round her and went again on to the balcony, Mrs. Bentley was below, and called to know if Anice was with Lady Carstairs. Vera said a few words, watching the two who advanced; she could not help it.

Grey's face was pale and his manner earnest; he was talking to Georgie, but on reaching the group at the front, lifted his cap and left them all; while Georgie stayed outside, attitudinizing a little in her shapely costume.

It was just a chance whether Grey had been flattered or bored at the advance she had made; for advance it was. She had gone down to the quay, and the first thing Grey had seen as he landed was Georgie. She had acknowledged that she had been aware of his danger—a danger which he had felt keenly, and which by the way she had not, for he had been in comparative safety before she knew of it, and she did not care at all about him for his own sake; she had seemed to hide so much feeling, and to have acted with such spontaneity

and carelessness of appearances with him ; she looked very well, in her flush of calculating gambling, which he thought was womanly anxiety ; she was a connection of Vera's ; and—Georgie knew what she was about—Grey Meredith *was* flattered.

So Vera saw, divining something at the time, and having it described with all due frankness in the evening, as he told them all first the story of the day ; how he had ventured when his mother required some remedy not to be had in Cadenabbia ; the last steamer had gone from Bellagio ; he felt bound to return, and when on starting he and the boatmen had realized the danger was immediate, not possible, they could not regain the shore ; they had to cross.

Grey Meredith spoke very gravely then.

Among his hearers was Anice Bentley, sitting a little behind him, very busy with some work for Vera, also Georgie in full view, Charlie Carstairs and a friend, all of whom had come up, thinking it too doubtful to go out late that evening. All guessed something then in his tone, though only Vera, later on, heard how fully the danger had been realized, and how imminent it had really been. Still at this point of his narrative even then Grey suddenly paused: "No, it was not cheerful; and my only consolation then was that I had said nothing to my mother and that no one was likely to have discovered our whereabouts. I did find afterwards that one friend of mine," with a smile and glance at Georgie, "had seen the last part of our struggles; however, then we might have

saved ourselves by swimming (at least I might; so few of those boatmen can swim). It is a great thing that no one was anxious about me."

"I had quite enough anxiety, thank you," said Georgie; "you declare that I only saw the comparatively safe part, but I can't say that it was pleasant."

"No," rejoined Grey, "without any undue conceit about myself, even in that 'comparative safety,' I should not have liked to see any one I knew, or did not know, for that matter. Once I wondered if——"

Grey paused. He evidently did not say what he had begun to say, but to change the subject went on: "I wondered if you people on this balcony had ever learnt to use my telescope."

"Not they," said Charlie Carstairs, with

his boyish laugh. "I don't believe a woman ever can use a telescope."

"Very few," said Grey, "though I don't mind trying to teach some of them; most of them find it easier to see through stone walls."

"That's more than men can do," said Vera, with a keen remembrance of the afternoon hours in which she and Anice had watched behind the walls, before which Georgie now sat, triumphant in her daring, being the only person who had at the time sympathized with Grey. "I don't think that many men can either see through walls or through characters." Of course the challenge was taken up, but Anice Bentley suddenly rose; she could bear the surface talk no longer.

"I must go; we leave so early in the

morning that it is good-bye to every one," she said.

Among the others Grey Meredith came round to her: "Of course, I'd get up if there was any chance of your mother needing me; but she wants no one with your brother and sister-in-law, does she?"

"No," said Anice; "thank you very much. Six is too early for you, and there is nothing to be done."

"I've said good-bye to them all; they said I should find you here. It isn't for long; we shall meet in town directly, I hope," he went on in his frank friendly way. "Good-bye, Anice; pleasant voyage and lots of success in the season. (One moment, Miss Leyton!) Love to your sisters good-bye."

“Good-bye, Grey,” said Anice, taking his hand.

“It has been a bad day for the last at Cadenabbia,” he said, holding hers, “but I got the worst of it.”

“We would all like to go on saying good-bye to Anice,” said Vera, “but I shall take her away now.”

So the partings were made, and while Grey Meredith again sat down by Georgie and improved on the new departure in that direction, without prejudice to his self-avowed devotion to Vera, in the passage Vera and Anice exchanged a few words.

“You did very well,” said Vera, among the rest. “Believe me, whatever happens, you can only gain by keeping the secret of our watch.”

“Yes; but—but it was a little hard that

he should think," her voice quivered, "that only Miss Leyton cared."

"Better so," said Vera uncompromisingly, and changed the subject. Needless to say she had another score against Miss Leyton.

Only at the last, as they said good-bye, Anice faltered: "I will be brave; but, oh, Vera, how could you have cared for him once and not always?"

"My dear, I am married," said Vera, feeling a little hypocritical.

Anice blushed. "I ought not to have said it," she said simply.

"Don't vex yourself about that," said Vera brightly.

But when she went back again, after a few more words of friendship and promise to have Anice with her as often as possible

during the season, Vera found Grey Meredith much occupied with Georgie Leyton.

Vera's provocation with them both was seen by the sharp-eyed Georgie, and to a slight degree felt with astonishment by the somewhat innocent Grey, when a little later he tried to get real sympathy and win some sentimental advantage for himself in a brief and by Georgie unpreventable *tête-à-tête*. Georgie set the coldness down to jealousy, though a little surprised at Vera being so human; and, flattered for the second time that day, as only a man used to women can be, by such subtle displeasure at a slight showing of devotion to another during a new allegiance, Grey Meredith ventured a little more of devotion to herself. Nevertheless, Vera was very human, and so on the provocation of Georgie's flirtation, be-

lieving that she was acting in the interest of Anice, she suddenly made up her mind that at least where Grey Meredith was concerned she would beat Georgie on her own ground.



CHAPTER X.

ON THE SURFACE.

“Hélas ! ces trois mots de l’homme—
Hier, aujourd’hui, demain !”—*Lamartine.*

AFTER Anice had gone things went wrong. There was a day or two of bad weather; a day or two of bad temper, both on the part of Georgie and of Grey; a day or two of bad spirits for Vera. The peacefulness of the place was disturbed, and the little party awoke from their various dreams and hopes, and thought of “plans”—the most unidyllic things on earth.

Grey grudged each moment, yet fretted sometimes for his work, and now every one was restless, and Georgina Leyton had

become a little too open in her manner of intending proprietorship; whilst it made all the difference to the comfort of his talk if she were beside Vera, selfish and scrutinizing, instead of Anice, innocent and pleasing, on occasions when a third of some sort had to be there.

Grey and his mother were to go one way, Charlie and his tutor another, and Vera and Georgie were to return to England, met in Paris by Sir Ralph Carstairs. The rain had lessened that last evening before the party was further broken up. It was warm and summerlike again, and behind the hills the moon rose full and eclipsed by her splendour the stars which had been bravely struggling through the cloud-drifts. The night was very glorious, and at nearly ten o'clock, getting a little tired of

Georgie's unsympathetic silence, Vera once more went out on the balcony.

"How lovely it is!" she exclaimed.
"Won't you come out on to the balcony,
Georgie?"

"A great deal too damp, thank you,"
answered Georgie.

Looking down, Vera was perceived by Charlie and Grey Meredith, who called up to her in a duet:

"We want you both to come out on the lake."

Charlie added: "Look jolly well sharp, and tell Georgie to be quick."

"It's too damp," said Vera doubtfully, for the great expanse of silvered water was very tempting to a lake-lover.

"She thinks the lake is wet after the rain," laughed Charlie.

Vera was going to say "No," in spite of Grey's plea—"Oh, do come; it's our last night,"—when Georgie came on to the balcony, all-awakened by the male voices.

"Miss Leyton," said Grey, seeing her form beside Vera, "you won't be hard-hearted? Do beg Lady Carstairs to come out with us."

"You didn't want to go out," asked Vera of her in a low tone; but Georgie never responded to a woman's words whilst a man was present.

"I'm sure Lady Carstairs will come. We were wishing to go out, but no one came near us all the evening. It would serve you right if we wouldn't go now."

"Come on, then," said Charlie impatiently.

"You will go?" inquired Vera, who, stupidly we own, never got quite used to Georgie's moods, *plus* and *minus* mankind.

"Of course," answered that lady, "unless you are afraid?" She had the grace to add this, as they parted to get cloaks.

Descending through the hall, where only one or two men lingered over the papers or at the door (most people going to bed early at Cadenabbia), Vera and Georgie went out, and were welcomed by their two rowers.

"Have you got a boat? We paid off ours to-day," said Charlie.

"No difficulty in getting one now, if you are quick," said Grey.

The men had not gone to bed, and while

the boat was called for by Charlie, Grey drew attention to the nightingales singing one against the other, or answering to the long low plaintive call with trills of joyfulness.

Charlie came back in a moment. "He says the boats are asleep, so far as I can make out, and he wants to know which we would like awakened, two *piccoli*, or a great boat? Shall we have two boats? Let's——"

Vera demurred: "Oh! let us be together."

But simultaneously Grey had said, "Take the two light boats, and we'll race each other, Charlie. Miss Leyton, would you come with me first?"

(This was in accordance with a previous whisper of Charlie's to Grey: "*I* won't row

Georgie, you know.” Showing nothing of annoyance; after brief surprise at disturbance of the arrangement as he had conceived it most proper, Georgie with her cousin, the chaperon (!) with himself; to this General Grey responded: “We’ll go shares in our pleasures.”)

But asking Miss Leyton to go with him he pleased Miss Leyton.

A conversation took place between the two rowers before they each handed their charges into the boats, of which the ladies heard Grey’s last two words, as if he meant to be obeyed; “*Mind that.*” He continued: “Come on, please, Miss Leyton. Lady Carstairs, I have told Charlie to row straight across to San Giovanni; mind he keeps tryst with us. Of course we shall be first.”

"Of course you won't," said Charlie.
"In with you, Vera."

Perhaps the conversations, or parts of the conversations, in the two boats as they shot out into the silver had better be arranged in parallel columns. Charlie rowed violently for a time, then gave up, then again put on a spurt. Grey rowed slowly and steadily across, and when he paused, paused deliberately. They had the lake almost to themselves.

Is Lake Como more beautiful in the twinkling sunlight, or in the rippling moonlight? Either is good, but never had it seemed more beautiful than to Vera that night, when the ebony shadows were cut by the silvery waves, and after passing through the placid light they gained the peaceful darkness on the other side.

BOAT No. I.

Voice in the Bow and voice of the *Rower* marked *B.* and *R.* respectively.

[Boats keep near each other for a little while, then separate; Charlie's oars, Georgie's lines, having the same tendency to increase distance.]

R. (In a low tone.) There! Meredith can have her, since he's so fond of her. I've told him he can land her on the opposite shore and leave her there, or stay with her—I *won't* change.

B. What are you talking about?

B. Some one whom I *won't* row.

BOAT No. II.

Voice in the Bow and voice of the *Rower* marked *B.* and *R.* respectively.

R. One can get along so much better with the lighter boats; those to hold two are four times as light as those to hold four, and sometimes twice as pleasant.

B. I like the lighter boats, as you say, sometimes. But it is rather a trial if one has an un-

Take care. Sounds trustworthy rower.
travel on this water. I won't mention
But of all detestable names — sound
creatures, Georgie travels so far on
is one. Meredith the lake; but one
thinks she's a jolly of the party here
sort of girl. He amuses himself at
don't know what a my expense.
jolly sort of girl R. Don't you
is! Are you warm think you're a little
enough, Vera? too hard on Charlie?

B. Quite.

R. Look out, don't He always seems to
let us go near them. me so gentle with
I hate the sound Lady Carstairs; but
of her voice even I've noticed that
when I don't know you and he don't
what she says. She get on together.
riles me. Look at B. I should think
not. He is so rude.

that fishing boat
with the lantern to
attract the fish.

Vera spoils him, but
she likes boys so
much. I think that
I prefer men.

R. May I smoke ?

(The boat drifts.)

(The boat drifts.)

BOAT No. I.

(Charlie begins to sing,
and sings two or three
songs, with a scrap or two
of conversation between
whiles ; they get across
the lake ; it is quite dark
there.)

R. I promised
Grey I'd land here
and meet him ; but
I'm hanged if I'll
change coxes ? *You'd*
just as soon have me

BOAT No. II.

(Grey smokes and muses, and
forgets to talk. Georgie
is impatient, but will not
show it. After a time
she says :—)

B. I suppose this
is good-bye.

R. Yes. What ? I
beg your pardon.
One becomes rather
dreamy. Yes, it is
our last night here.

as him — wouldn't you, Vera?

B. It is very good of either of you to row me. I don't want to change.

R. I don't, and Georgie don't, and I don't believe Meredith does; it is only awkward when the ladies don't choose —but he's done the civil to you, and I don't care if I do the uncivil to Georgie—let's stay as we are.

B. I am content.

I shall look back to Cadenabbia with the very greatest pleasure.

B. It is a charming place.

R. With charming people—like ourselves! I should like to thank your party for allowing me to join it; my stay would have been very different if you had not been here.

B. (Hesitatingly.) Did I — we—make so much difference?

R. (Gallantly.)

Why correct yourself? *You* have made a great deal of difference to all of us. Yes, it makes one very sad that our party should be broken up—it can't be the same thing in town.

B. I often think one knows people on such occasions as never on any others.

R. And how much some people gain by being known!

(A little desultory talk follows. Georgie gains very little ground, though he answers her in her own vein, till they near the shore.)

R. I won't land,
and then we can't
change.

B. As you please,
dear.

R. (With a spurt
to take him away
from the shore, but
which brings him
alongside Grey's
boat coming in the
other direction.) We
aren't going to land.

The two boats just avoid colliding, and Grey catching the sides together, says : "How are you? Now, Charlie boy, out

B. Must we land?
It is so much plea-
santer on the water.
The others seem to
be returning already.

R. (Looking
round.) Hullo! stop
there.

(Is suddenly vivacious—
cigarette pitched overboard,
spurt put on; seeing that
Charlie is not looking, steers
across his course.)

with you! we aren't going to have *step-bairns* to-night."

"We are going to stay as we are," says Charlie.

"Do what I tell you," says Grey in a low firm tone, and Charlie resists no longer. They change places.

"*Au revoir,* Miss Leyton," says Grey. Vera has not spoken a word, nor has Georgie. They leave the shore.

BOAT I.

Now contains Vera and Grey —silent. Grey rows slowly and increases distance between the boats, but says nothing till they have reached the silvery water again.

R. (Stopping.)

I've made an enemy
of Miss Leyton for

BOAT II.

Now contains Georgie and Charlie silent in rage; Charlie rows desperately and Georgie steers as straight as she can for the last lights in the hotel opposite.

R. (Insolently.)

Why didn't you try
to make yourself

life. I'll pitch into Charlie. I relied on his doing the thing decently. He must have known that I wanted to be with you, though I put it to him that we should divide the pleasures of being with either lady. And there I had to bundle him out of the boat and show Miss Leyton how little I cared for her.

B. What *did* it matter what boat

agreeable to Meredith? he was in a precious hurry to get rid of you!

B. (Foolishly.) I was in no hurry to have you thrust upon me.

R. (Chuckling.) Double score! This makes amends for much! Oho! sits the wind in that quarter, miss?

B. Hold your tongue, sir.

R. With great pleasure. I'm delighted with this

you were in? I thought you very rude.

R. Some things force rudeness on a man. What did it matter? Do you mean that you would just as soon have Charlie? Miss Leyton has that advantage over you—she wouldn't. She told me so!

(Vera does not reply.)

R. (Looks round and sees that the other boat is suffi-

arrangement now I know *how* pleased you are!

(Georgie draws her cloak round her and sulks. She tries to see the other boat, which Charlie perceiving, says:—)

You'd like to know what they are saying. Well, now, I was just thinking I'd row beside them to plague Meredith, but I shan't! They shall have some peace from you. I quite excuse Merc-

ciently far off, then says :—)

Charlie has more sense than I expected. Do you think I'd give up tamely my last night with you here?

B. Don't spoil it, Grey; you are only making me uncomfortable when you talk and look like that. And I do wish that you had stayed with Georgie —No, I really do.

R. If *you* are fishing for compliments

dith preferring Vera; she's ten times better looking and a million times jollier than you are.

B. I am forced to be in the same boat with you, but I am not listening to a word you say.

R. Well, don't strain your ears to hear the others.

(tries to laugh), that
isn't like you, Vera.

(Suddenly.) I wish
you could know my
uncle, Paul Words-
worth.

B. Why do you
say that now?

R. I don't know.
It struck me à *pro-*
pos of compliments.
Did you never meet
him? At least you
must have heard
his story?

B. I have seen
him, and we were
to have met him at
dinner last year,

(Silence, broken by Charlie
trying experiments with the
oars. Georgie becomes really
nervous.)

but I know nothing
more than the news-
papers tell us.

R. How mislead
ing they are too
about public men
in private life! But
very few people
know Wordsworth's
story; I suppose he
is about forty now,
and the thing hap-
pened a long time
ago. He got infatu-
ated over a very
worthless sort of
woman — worthless
as to being a good
sort, you know,

(During this time Georgie
sulks, and Charlie sings to
himself.)

position all right,
even above his own.

After getting all she
could out of him
she threw him over.

He's awfully bitter
about women now,
but it drove him into
work. You shall know
him. I know you'd
like him—I'll bring
him round. He's very
grave, you know,
but a tremendously
interesting man, and
just the sort to suit
you for a friend.

B. Why did you
think of him now?

B. Why can't you
keep the boat
straight?

R. Why should I?
I'll let *them* have a
bit of peace from
you, at all events.

R. Don't know.

It was a waste of
time when you were
there!

B. What made
you think of him?

R. I don't know,
except this: I want
you to have plenty
of friends, but I
don't want to
have men who'll talk
nonsense to you.

B. One is more
than enough.

R. You're not like
yourself I
won't play any
more!

B. That's this.

R. And what is
there for me to
like in rowing *you*?
Spoilt my evening,
you have!

(Rows in silence. After a
time:—)

B. Oh, how glorious this light is! I am glad that we came out. It is the sort of night to make one forget that annoyances ever existed, or will come again.

R. Thank you.

B. Why?

R. If annoyances aren't present and I am, I am not an annoyance.

B. I see.

B. You tiresome boy! How I wish we had never come out.

R. Don't say '*I
see*' in that tone!

(Semi-serious badinage for
a few moments, then con-
cludes gravely :—)

Will you let me
look at you?

B. (With sur-
prise.) I thought you
were doing that, if it
is necessary; what
do you want?

R. (Turning the
boat so that the
moonlight falls on
her face—is silent
for a few moments
taking her in.)
There! I've got a
picture of you that

B. Do go straight
home, or I shall
call to the others!

R. (Sings at the
top of his voice
latest comic song :)
' You do look so
lovely in a rage! '

you can't take away.
I want you, now if
you can, to give me
something to keep in
memory of to-night
—anything that you
wear.

B. (Suddenly.) I
gave you a rose
once and repented
of it ever after.

R. I don't see
why you should . . .
In any case if you
gave me the rose,
which might have
been a life-long
pleasure, and I let
it go, you can give

me something now
which....which..... It
will be a life-long
pain to know that I
can *only* have such a
a trifle—*only, in me-*
moriam amoris. Give
me that pin you
wear. I will have one
made to replace it.
Give it to me, Vera.

B. Why take it
when it will—if it
will—give you pain?

R. Give it to me.

B. No, I cannot.

R. (Stiffly.) Well,
don't against your
will.....I suppose we

ought to push on.

(Rows fast.) Do you see the others?

B. Yes; and hear them. Charlie is singing, and I believe Georgie is calling.

R. (Calls.) Hullo! Stop! If Charlie has been rude to Miss Leyton he'll have to answer for it. If he doesn't like her — though why I can't see— it is only when I want you that she doesn't do! If he

B. I will call; I can stand this no longer, and I'll tell Mr. Meredith now, and Ralph later, how you have behaved to me tonight.

You'll be sorry for it.

hated to-night—he should behave like a gentleman.

R. Not I! I've got too much of Ralph in me for that!

B. The Carstairs are very determined.

The two boats approach each other.
“What's up?” said Grey.

“I told you that Charlie was perfectly untrustworthy with me, and he is. I've been tormented out of my life——”

“We'll change again,” said Charlie.

“In the middle of the lake? Certainly not; otherwise I should ask Miss Leyton to come in here. I am sure that Lady Carstairs would make room, and I would leave you without any one. I am so sorry you have been annoyed, Miss Leyton.”

“Annoyed? Insulted! terrified!”

“I was under the impression that Charlie

was a gentleman," said Grey, "otherwise I should not have proposed the little variation. Well, let us keep together now. We shall soon be home. Don't behave like a boy or a bear, Carstairs."

Without further accident home was reached, the boats were paid off, and the parties separated. Charlie was following the two ladies into the darkened hotel, when Grey stopped him.

"Good-night to you both. There are candles. Carstairs, I'm not going in till I have had a smoke. You stay with me."

Then Meredith let loose his wrath. So, as soon as they got upstairs, did Georgie, on a more innocent subject; and the last evening at Cadenabbia heard Meredith assuring Carstairs that his conduct should not be forgotten, and upstairs, Georgie

declaring to Vera that her behaviour with Mr. Meredith was disgraceful.

Vera said very little to Georgie, who was wild with passion, not in one of her merely hasty moods, but in a half hysterical state of rage. As it at length wore itself out, Georgie said: "You shall not *again* come between me and—"

She stopped short, looked at Vera venomously, and, with clenched teeth, was silent. She swept out of the room, and Vera heard the bedroom door locked.

Vera went to her room, thinking very little of what Georgie said, except once she wondered how her conduct *could* be disgraceful. She might have encouraged Grey, but she had not—surely.

She looked out for the last night on the beautiful lake, and then went quietly to

rest, for they would have to leave early to-morrow.

But Meredith, after he had done with Charlie, went back again for a boat, and spent the night on the still dark waters, he, the only thing restless and troubled on the calm lake of Como.



BOOK II.

CONFLICT.

It's no in titles nor in rank;
It's no in wealth like Lon'on bank
 To purchase peace and rest;
It's no in making muckle, mair;
It's no in books; it's no in lear;
 To make us truly blest.
If happiness hae not her seat
 And centre in the breast,
We may be wise, or rich, or great,
 But never can be blest.
Nae treasures nor pleasures
 Could make us happy long,
The heart ay's the part, ay,
 That makes us right or wrong.

Epistle to Davie.—BURNS.

Book II.—Conflict

CHAPTER I.

PAUL WORDSWORTH.

“ From his intellect
And from the stillness of abstracted thought
He asked repose.”—*Excursion*.

CONTRASTING with the clear air and the calm restfulness of Como is the murky fog and unceasing rattle of the London traffic. It is true that Paul Wordsworth’s house is just out of a noisy thoroughfare, but the little street is on the direct route to many a fashionable abode, and is loved by aristocratic coachmen who prefer byways. Not having to drive, their younger “ladies” do not; but what is good enough for the

Right Honourable Paul Wordsworth to live in is good enough for other folk to drive in. In this world one cannot have amusement and safety, without a great deal of trouble. So might run the thoughts of the variously collared, cuffed and coated tribe who choose Sharp Street, Piccadilly, as the course for their precious convoys.

Paul Wordsworth does not much care whether they pass his house or not. When he is out of office, as at present, he spends a good deal of time in his own rooms, so far as people can see; but in reality he is often miles away, frequently not on this planet, sometimes (as he once said very quaintly) "if there be another Universe, not in this Universe." Paul, of Calvinistic forbears and north country origin, takes Life very seriously, and, of modern learning

and philosophic education, is not disposed to consider as fear or fruitage his personal death. His nerves are as steady as any man's may be who indulges in the expensive luxury of thought on a rather delicate constitution, but he supplies his sometime lack of physical strength by splendid perseverance; is much respected and a little liked wherever he chooses to go. His power has purchased for him the right to be fastidious, and he exercises his criticship in society as in literature with a calm independent air, which seems to say: "Against me there is no appeal." Small people know his solidity, and greater minds his geniality, half hid in seeming ungraciousness; just one of the men who ought continually to have been forced into gentleness by his love, instead of being goaded into hate

once and for all by a doubly false woman. Yet, with consequent severity, his chivalrous and philosophic opinion of womanhood remained true to its standard, though, as he told himself, his personal allegiance could never again be given. Doubtless this was all theory, but men like Paul Wordsworth do not every day find women with power to test theories.

It is a long description to give of a man's nature, but many lived near Paul Wordsworth himself and for want of the key could not penetrate beyond the outer wall of his reserve. A brow open and broad, arched in the centre — beneath hair, too long, too thin and too shaggy (a little touched already with grey), and above very steady dark eyes and well-formed features; a well-proportioned figure

too, never quite at ease unless its owner was very much in earnest, when its every gesture followed the eager forcible speech. These characteristics are known of all men. Though the age of forty is the childhood of statesmanship now-a-days, Paul Wordsworth had already become a power in England.

“Who is there?” he asked, as his servant entered into his study that June afternoon. But before the reply was given, Grey Meredith had introduced himself and came to perch himself on a corner of the davenport *sans cérémonie*. It was evident that Paul Wordsworth had no terrors for his half-nephew.

“You bad shilling,” said Paul Wordsworth, “you can go away as you came. I have no time for you to-day. I have

to write without an idea to put on paper, and to speak to-night when I can only do myself justice if I don't."

"I told you that you'd suffer from congestion of the brain soon," responded Grey. "Do you realize how few words you exchange with any one now-a-days? What you ought to do is to go into society more and— But, really, am I interrupting you?"

"Yes; of course you are. No; I have got a block in my brain. I can't write a word. I don't know when it has happened to me before. I *can't* do it to-day."

So saying, he scanned the MS., written in a good-sized clear hand with broad yet angular letters, and drew a line across the last page.

"There, I wrote only those two hun-

dred words in the last hour, and not one of them means anything. Take my word for it, Grey; make as much effort as you like beforehand, but never say, do, or write with an effort, if speech, action, or book is to be worth its toil. Your thought isn't ripe unless it can run of itself, if you are usually a rapid writer."

"You'd say the contrary another day," said Meredith.

"Of course I would," replied Wordsworth instantly. "Never suppose that when I say a thing one day I mean to repeat it the next. I believe in no infallibility, much less in that of a person whose good-for-nothingness I have so often experienced as I have experienced my own. What have you come for?" he added.

By this time all had been put away

neatly and Meredith was on the sofa and Paul Wordsworth sat in an old oak chair, in which (as malice might say he was aware) he looked very dignified. He never lounged. His rooms were filled with luxuries, and comfortable chairs were among them for his own perception and other people's reception. At this moment he made Grey Meredith, though really far the stronger and more athletic of the two, look a feminine and trifling character, and Grey Meredith's youth and good looks were eclipsed at once by Paul Wordsworth's strong intellectually-matured appearance.

“It gives me courage to say what I came for,” said Grey laughing. “If you are temporarily on my level with a block in your brain, I want a very, very great favour from you.”

"So?" said Wordsworth. "Go to the point. No one is backward now-a-days in asking for anything, except the people one would specially like to help. *You* needn't beat about the bush. Self or friend?"

"Don't know. Both, I should say. The fact is——"

"*You* don't want money——"

"And you can't part with your brains, unfortunately. No; but I want a loan,—the loan of yourself for half an hour. I was telling you of Lady Carstairs. I'm going to her to-day, and I promised to bring you. So you'll just come along with me now—at once, immediately."

Grey looked for a refusal, and felt like a small boy who had fallen because he had erringly expected his companion to pull back when the answer came.

“Very well,” said Paul Wordsworth.

“Shall we go?”

Grey sat up and stared.

“Didn’t you want me after all?”

“The truth is I expected a lot of opposition, and had prepared a quantity of arguments wherewith to convince you that you were wrong.”

“I’ll tell you what they were. ‘No. 1—Lady Carstairs is a friend of yours.’ Of that I am not sure, and I want to be; so first of all I go because Lady Carstairs is said to be a friend of yours.”

“Look here,” said Grey, “even from you I won’t stand a sneer like that.”

“My dear fellow, I’m only chaffing, and we are alone. I believe that Lady Carstairs is an angel, and I have a curiosity to see her, for which you are answerable.”

"Rubbish!" answered Grey; "as if you have ever had a curiosity to see any woman."

Wordsworth looked at the younger man a little sarcastically, and the fine lips shut themselves, then opened for faint smile and forcible speech.

"Curiosity and women, especially when connected, are the guardians of all good and all evil in the world. Remember that you were at first in your letters from Como voluble about Lady Carstairs, and then completely silent till last night, when you attempted to give me a dispassionate and disinterested account of this *friend* of yours. All of which awoke my suspicions. I don't ask you for any confidence; I only say, don't burn your fingers. I hate these flirtations with a married woman. I am not

going to interfere, but I wished to see what she was like in case you got into any bother with her."

Grey up to this had listened to the elder man's a little too measured utterances with some astonishment, and now again lost patience.

"Lady Carstairs is far above discussion, if you please," said Grey, beginning quietly but ending in anger; "but I'll trouble you not to insult *me* with such insinuations."

"I gave you chaff and I gave you candour——"

"Neither of which are acceptable on this subject."

"Well done!" said Paul Wordsworth with warm approval; "you are quite right. I'd drop this; but I want you to hear reason No. 2 why I am glad to go with you

to-day. Carstairs is put on that committee I told you of with me. It's about the first time I ever got into personal talk with him ; he's more or less of an able man, I should say."

"Able brute!" put in Grey.

"I daresay he is. I know nothing about him ; he never interested me, except that he intends to be No. 1 if he can. You say he is a brute."

"It has nothing to do with the case," said Grey.

"No personalities allowed ? I suppose that husbands are brutes, and brutes are husbands, sometimes. At all events, a few days ago I could not do less than say I would like to be allowed to call on Lady Carstairs ; so you come *à propos*."

"Is that all ?"

“ What else do you want? Look here, Grey, for goodness’ sake don’t make a fool of yourself. I did it once, so I know. I have always hoped you would escape. It has gone hard with you this time.”

“ Yes,” said Grey, and Paul Wordsworth was silent.

The next time they spoke—these two who had always been in confidence, if so unequal in intellect and position and even in age—it was of another matter. But by-and-by Grey jumped up:

“ Are you coming?”

“ Yes.”

“ It is her At Home, so I wouldn’t go too early; but it is a charity to go. I said nothing about you. I thought I’d surprise her.”

“ More surprise than pleasure, certainly.

So it is an At Home you're dragging me to? I ask you, Grey? I did not expect that of you."

"Well, if you'd rather come a little later——"

"In for a penny in for a pound, and if so why stop at the pound? What an idiotic saying it is! As if men had no common-sense; but there! they have not. *No*, we'll go on to your friend's At Home."

By this time the two men were out in the street. Grey was unusually constrained.

"A penny for your thoughts! I suppose Thorold Rogers' volumes are responsible for these pennyweights of proverbs! What is it?"

. Grey half stopped, and very slowly the two paced down the street.

"I have an idea in my head. I'd tell

it to no living soul but you; not even to her—though it's about her. You see she is in a very difficult position as Carstairs' wife in many ways—and, I think, she might like you, and if Carstairs saw that you thought a good lot of her he might treat her better. Of course it is his interest to be in with you just now. Do you understand? I'm an awful fool to have said anything," Grey continued, "I always am an ass."

"Yes, either a fool or a sage you certainly are, if I do understand you. In my old age to become the recipient of a lover's lunacies! Let us walk up Sharp Street again, and let me study my new part. It is somewhat complicated. Now if you are going to get white and make faces, I can't really take it in. The con-

sulting physician must make his diagnosis before he can approve the course."

The two men had turned. Grey was angry and pleased at his own confidence in Wordsworth, and irritated by and interested in the manner of treatment.

"Go on," said he, half laughing against his will.

"At first I thought I was taken as a sort of chaperon for you, or as a little offering of tender flowers. 'Behold,' says Grey Meredith, 'I have brought to thy sweet feet in chains that severe recluse and unsociable hermit, yclept Paul Wordsworth.' I know that my appearance will excite some minds, though from no personal merits, unless it be a merit not to go to At Homes. Is Lady Carstairs a lion-hunter?"

"Not that I know of," said Grey, with a genuine smile.

"She must have a snobbery of some sort. Everybody has. Some have the snobbery of titles, some of clergy, some of authors, some of mere money: we all worship power. And I just managed to comprehend your meaning—(let us turn again)—by my talk with Carstairs yesterday. A snob is a man who gives way without reason, and flatters you without believing in you, whether you're a peer, a priest, a prig, or a purse. Bah! Carstairs is a snob where I am concerned, and I, quite as ready as he himself really is to see the weakness of the man he flatters, simply laugh at him. So he is a brute to his wife? And you would use his snobbery and abuse my good nature

by asking me to pay attention to her, to excite, not his jealousy, but some pride in her? Grey, you are really very deep, but it is not to be done at the price!"

"How on earth did you put all this together?" said Grey.

"Do you insult me?" said Wordsworth, with his pleasant smile. "You are a babe, my dear boy, a guileless babe, and, given you and Carstairs, it is not a difficult matter to divine your weak spots with relation to an unknown quantity."

"I wonder if you have any idea what she is like, you guileful sage."

"I have not considered the matter. I suppose a pretty little thing with 'speaking' eyes, rather given to attitudinizing, and making every one flatter himself that only he knows of her secret sorrows, on which in

tête-à-tête she dilates at much length. And I am to be let in for another confidence."

"You will have no such luck," said Grey laughing. "But here we are."

They stopped at the door of a large house in Grosvenor Place, and presently "Mr. Wordsworth and Mr. Meredith" were preceded by their names, and after some salutations on the staircase from those overtaken or met, Wordsworth saw the lady without any hat, whom one supposes to be the hostess of an At Home. It was a tall dignified figure in black, only relieved by innumerable beads; a lovely head, he thought, and a pale beautiful face, with very quiet manners and charming low voice. Wordsworth was introduced, and Grey keenly watched him. There was certainly some interest in the

way he regarded her. Grey, who knew them both, was sure that each was correcting a mental judgment already formed, and as he had done a hazardous thing in presenting his best friend to his queen—as all men do who introduce those they are fond of to each other—Grey was very content as he thought that he read approval on the face of each. Wordsworth seemed inclined to linger by the door to try to converse with the hostess, and Grey was nothing loth when up came Carstairs himself and forced Wordsworth into talk.

Almost before he had quite made up his mind whether he cared to enter the house again, Wordsworth found himself asked to dine the next evening.

The guests had more or less crowded into the rooms; there was a cessation of

the stream, and Wordsworth marked Grey detaining Vera's attention for a moment or two.

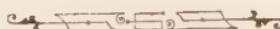
"To-morrow night?" said Wordsworth.
"Wednesday? No special business. I have no engagement. Thanks, I shall be very happy." He spoke very slowly and absently. He had been watching the two, and saw that Vera was a little impatient. She joined the others, Grey following.

"I have asked Mr. Wordsworth to dinner, to-morrow, Vera," said Carstairs.

Of course she should have said something readily and easily civil at once, such as would have come naturally even to her on any other occasion, but her husband being present and she having been interested in Paul Wordsworth before she saw him, she became thoughtful and appeared

a little *distrain* from the very intensity of her feeling that this was a critical point. She was silent, perhaps for half a moment, and they scrutinized each other—Paul Wordsworth and Vera Carstairs—before she said to him, “I hope that you can come.”

“Your hesitation was most unnatural and ill-bred,” said her husband to her a little later; but Paul Wordsworth had felt himself weighed and accepted, so pardoned the deliberation.



CHAPTER II.

HOW IT BEGAN.

“ La plupart des gens ne jugent des hommes que par la vogue qu'ils ont, ou par leur future.”—*La Rochefoucauld*.

In intervals of the conversation-exciting music, Paul Wordsworth was greeted by one and another, and Vera moved about with her quiet pleasant manner in mitigation of the dulness of an assemblage where half the people know each other too well and nearly half know nobody in the room. Among the small minority who were enjoying themselves were Georgie Leyton, keeping a small circle in fits of laughter, (especially during a pathetic song), and Anice Bentley, who had found to her astonishment that she did like going out

and was always pleased to be in Vera's house.

Paul Wordsworth spoke to Anice presently; he had known her through Grey, and a few of the curious eyes stuck in the unintelligent faces of the ugly-natured well-dressed women, who have become only "envious spectators of the game," were turned towards the two. Every one who was any one knew Paul Wordsworth by sight; he was pointed out and whispered about, and those whom he spoke to—even the young girl he greeted—came in for a share of those regards.

"Those clever men always make for the prettiest girls in the room. Who is it Mr. Wordsworth is talking to?" said a well-known lady to Grey. "She is so pretty."

“Miss Bentley,” said Grey.

“Is it? Who is she? Do you know her? and you don’t go and talk to her in preference to old dowagers like me?” laughed the lady, giving him no time to answer. “Mr. Wordsworth has better taste. How prettily she colours! She looks charming.”

“She would be flattered if she knew your opinion,” said Grey. He wanted to talk to Vera, and though he knew he could not do so, the party was fretting him. He lost the complimentary opening.

“You know Miss Bentley?” repeated the lady.

“For years,” said Grey. “I know her very well.”

“Ah! that accounts for your not noticing how pretty she is. Were you ever one of

a blackberry party, Mr. Meredith? More amusing than this kind of party, you know. You think me quite mad? Confess it."

"I did not understand what you meant," said Grey, a little bit severely; for he, who mused on the one subject day and night, thought that the lady was referring to a certain expedition in which he and Vera had lost their way for half an hour or so. When a man once gets into a state of mind in which he hears references to the subject of his thought in the most innocent remarks, he is likely to hear nothing but allusions (as he fancies) to things precious to himself, but about which in reality no soul knows or cares.

"No," the lady went on, "I don't suppose that you do understand. But you see one would be utterly weary if one

didn't amuse oneself with one's own thoughts on these occasions, and I thought of that childish lesson about the blackberries *à propos* of you young men."

"What was it?" said Grey. "I need teaching very much."

"I am sure of it. Well, as children we used to take our donkeys and get the blackberries for jam; I'm going to the point directly—which was and is for every one, how to get the finest blackberries of life. Some took sticks and made for the topmost clusters, but I used to go along the ditches and low down, where people didn't think of looking, there were beauties, hidden and cool, and oh! so fat, and black and sweet, and no scratches as their price."

"You speak with feeling; may I take

you to have some strawberries downstairs?"

"No, you can introduce Mr. Wordsworth—he isn't in the ditch."

"But oh! so fat, and black and sweet," said Grey. "Am I, then, only the stick to reach him by?"

"Yes, in many people's eyes," said the lady shrewdly; and at this moment up came Georgie Leyton, and, as soon as she conveniently could, made known her desire to talk to Mr. Wordsworth; and many others did the same thing. Grey wondered what the proverb of the blackberries meant, and then harked back in thought to the origin of the subject—that he had not noticed the charms of the girl he had known too long. He finished his introductions and then made his way to

Anice, with not much thought of the application, which the lady had made at venture. Anice was delighted by his notice, and whether it was that others were now drawing her out, or whether he suddenly saw her more as they did who were not pre-occupied, certain it is that he was by no means to be pitied for his act of condescension.

Vera came down to tea with Paul Wordsworth at last, when the crush had much diminished and only a few lingered on.

Grey noticed their presence by the bright colour flashing over Anice's face, and the smile, which was a reflection of Vera's own; and, like a child who will be quite good with others till his nurse is seen again after absence, Grey began to fidget in himself.

Vera was looking very tired, almost wan, and Wordsworth spoke in a tone of quite friendly authority, made her rest, and waited on her with a special attention which surpassed his usual politeness. He sat down beside her, and they began to talk, only being interrupted by the good-byes of the last departures. Grey fidgeted. Vera was listening to his friend with an attention she did not pay to him, and Wordsworth was watching her with evident pleasure and interest, trying to draw her out. Grey did not like it. He had wished that his friends should appreciate each other; but now that the first few minutes they had an opportunity for speaking should be used and appreciated was not pleasing to him.

“Are you staying here?” he said to Anice.

"No; but I stay till Lady Carstairs goes to dress; she asked me to. The others have gone and will send the carriage back soon. Oh, here they are!"

He saw her off and went back to the room to Vera and Wordsworth. They broke off in their conversation at his approach, and Vera made room for him at the other side of herself. But he would not see the sign of friendliness.

"Are you going to stay much later?" he said to Wordsworth.

"It is not very late, is it?" responded Wordsworth placidly. "Don't wait for me, if you are in a hurry."

On which Grey sat down beside them and sulked for a few minutes. Of course, he looked as if he were perfectly at ease and as if the others were including him,

as was natural, in their talk ; but, all the same, he felt that he was not wanted by the two whom he had introduced to each other, and he sulked.

However, Wordsworth did not like the trio so well as the duet, and he rose to go in a few minutes, just as Grey saw Georgie Leyton come into the room, with her colour a little brilliant, followed by Carstairs. Anice was talking to Charlie, who had also entered late, and the whole of our former *dramatis personæ*, with the addition of Paul Wordsworth, were now assembled in the otherwise deserted dining-room.

Swayed by common desire of making themselves disagreeable, I fear, Georgie and Grey devoted themselves to each other with some *empressement*; but no one took

any notice of the little game, though they were both very good players. Grey, like almost all rather good-looking and rather run-after young men, had practised the art of self-defence, and the instinct of coquetry is as natural to some kinds of men as to some kinds of women, just as it is unnatural with others of either sex. Georgie responded most readily, not slow to take advantage of more promising circumstances and to force him into familiarity before Carrstairs, whom she loved ; his wife, whom she hated ; and the stranger, whom she respected.

In the meanwhile her husband's entrance had discomposed Vera considerably. She had become unconscious of his wishes, and in so forgetting was fulfilling them ; but when he came she recollect ed that he expected her to interest Wordsworth, that

he was listening and looking. She lost her presence of mind, and made a few inane remarks in a jerky way quite different to her usual manner. Carstairs came to the rescue of the conversation.

"So glad to find you here still. We shall have some talk to-morrow evening. Suppose we leave those messy cakes and cream and have a cigar in my room? Ladies *will* have these awful arrangements in the afternoon."

"My experience to-day has been so agreeable that I shall repeat the pleasure, if I may. I have paid you too long a visit, Lady Carstairs; but I hope that you will let me come and finish what we were saying some other time."

"I shall be very pleased," said Vera stiffly, because she was nervous.

Wordsworth would not stay. Grey went with him and they walked towards the House. They heard seven o'clock strike.

"I had no idea it was so late," said Wordsworth. "Lady Carstairs is an interesting woman, certainly."

"So you seemed to find her," returned Grey. "I had no opportunity of speaking to her at all."

"You were too much occupied with others. You spent over half an hour with that pretty little girl, I forgot her name, and when you might have talked to our hostess you were too much amused by that dark young lady even to look round when Lady Carstairs spoke to you."

Grey did not answer directly.

"I think it is fearfully bad form to run

after a woman the first time you see her,” observed Grey.

Wordsworth laughed one of his rare laughs.

“My dear fellow, you are *too* amusing. You take me to a house, I am there with you, you keep me there to all intents and purpose, and you come away in an abominable temper because after being hunted, baited, and toadied all the afternoon I talk for a few minutes with pleasure to my hostess. Shall I tell you what we spoke of?”

“I am not in an abominable temper,” said Grey; “and, if you chose to talk from noon to night to Lady Carstairs about the man in the moon, what the devil does it matter to me?”

“Are you dining there to-morrow evening?” asked Wordsworth, taking no notice of

this particularly good-humoured speech.
“If so, we might go together. Shall I call for you?”

“No, I’m not asked,” said Grey. “And if I am not to have a word with any friend of mine when I go out with you, I shall not do it in the future.”

So saying he beckoned a cab and jumped in.

“Can I take you anywhere?” he called out to Wordsworth from within in a cuttingly civil tone.

“No, I thank you,” replied Wordsworth, very formally; “I shall walk.”

“Where to, sir?” came from the roof.

“The Bachelors,” shouted Grey. But as he passed Grosvenor Place the cabby was stopped at the house he had just come from.

CHAPTER III.

THE QUESTION.

“The lover who cannot wound has indeed lost anchorage.”—
George Meredith.

“Has her ladyship gone to dress yet?”
Grey asked of the butler, already well used to unconventional comings and goings.

“The carriage isn’t ordered till eight o’clock, sir,” was the reply; “I think her ladyship is in the boudoir.”

Vera had been only allowed to decline some extraneous invitations to dinner and dances—none that were in any way connected with the set in which Carstairs wished his wife to be admired and himself to be a power. The sole concession granted her was that she might still

wear black. Bennett was an excellent maid, and Vera's beauty allowed her a simple style of hair dressing, therefore Grey hoped to find her still writing, as was her custom just before dinner. He had armed himself with an excuse for returning, and telling the servant he would go up by himself, he ran upstairs and entered the now tenantless drawing-room. These large rooms in the Grosvenor Place houses have a conservatory at the end, dividing the double reception room from a small boudoir. It is extraordinary how much variety there is in houses similarly constructed; the very shape of the rooms seems to be altered at the caprice of the owner. This drawing-room with its handsome furniture and costly knick-knacks never seemed so much a part of Vera as

the little room in which she was really free to do as she pleased—at times.

Grey always entered it softly, and today, after his rush upstairs, he stopped by the conservatory to steady himself; a dim consciousness was stealing over him that he had just made a fool of himself, as in truth he had. The rich scent of heliotrope floated past him as he paused, and an angry voice was coming from within the room beyond. As soon as he realized it he had a moment's debate with himself as to whether he should enter; and in the moment, and while he went forward, deeming interruption could at least do no harm, he heard a few words from Carstairs. Needless to say, Grey Meredith had no wish to listen, and made his presence known the first moment that was possible.

“Wordsworth went away perfectly chilled and disgusted; it is not your fault if he ever enters this house again,” Grey heard Carstairs say. Then Carstairs saw Meredith enter, and did not welcome him. However, Grey, internally anathematizing his luck, and piquing himself on his self-possession, began:

“I came back to get that address of Lady Ainger’s; do you mind giving it to me now?”

Vera had been standing by her writing-table, her back to the light, opposite Carstairs, leaning against the mantelpiece. She stooped, picked up her address-book, and looked out the name in question.

“So sorry to give you the trouble. Are you going to the House to-night?” he asked of Carstairs.

"We are dining out," Carstairs answered curtly.

Vera gave him the address written down.

"Let me see it," said Carstairs suddenly.

She gave it him with a little drawing up of her form. He looked at it, and passed it on to Grey. "Why did you want it?" he asked, and pretended to smile. "Lady Ainger is rather too antediluvian for you."

"Wordsworth asked me to get it; he wants to write about her son," said Grey.

"Energetic man, Wordsworth; he told you he'd spared us an evening to-morrow? If you must go I won't keep you. We shall all be late for dinner."

As soon as Grey had gone, Carstairs continued :

"I spoilt his game for him that time!"

And he had the impudence to ask if I was going to the House! That's why I repeated that I'd asked Wordsworth and didn't ask him to dinner. You can be pleasant enough when it suits you, I see, when I am out of the way! But I'll have an eye on you, no fear!"

"You need not take the trouble," she said with scorn, and swept past him.

There is a second flight of stairs which opens out of the conservatory to the rooms at the back of the house. Up these Vera went to the room which she had taken since Daisy's death. She left the other, looking on to the Green Park, to Sir Ralph, even yet unable to bear its associations. He stayed still in the boudoir, scanning photographs, books and notes left to be answered. One photograph with folded

doors stood on her writing-table. He was looking for a photograph of Grey Meredith which he thought was certain to be there. This curtained frame had roses before it, half concealing it.

He thought he had found it; he cautiously opened it, but recognized the photograph of little Daisy, one which he did not remember. Vera, returning to fetch a forgotten letter, stood by him.

“Do you like it?” she said. “It was done only three days before her death.”

“You never showed it to me,” he said.

The question and answer had been soft and natural; then he suddenly turned back upon her:

“Why aren’t you dressing? Did you think that Meredith was still skulking about?”

“I *cannot* bear this,” she said. “Ralph,

listen to me! Do you wish to drive me mad—or—”

She staggered against the chimneypiece.

“I cannot understand you,” he said.
“Don’t begin to cry; you’ll make yourself a fright for to-night.”

“I shall not cry, and I can’t go to-night; you must go without me.”

“That you may stay and see Grey Meredith!”

“No, that I may stay and recover my strength, if you wish me to live—if you do. I have been exhausting myself all day, trying to please you in the way you wish. I wrote and worked for you all the morning, I entertained for you all the afternoon, and now your untruths and insults—am I fit to go out to-night? I am not going.”

"Has Meredith nothing to do with it?" he persisted. "You have never told me a lie yet—that I have found out. What you say I will believe. What is Meredith to you?"

"I do not care if you believe me or not; that is what you have driven me to," she said, trembling from head to foot, two bright spots of colour in her white cheeks, and her voice husky. "But if you like I can tell you this, that except that Grey is gentle to me and thoughtful for me when from you I have neither gentleness nor thoughtfulness—I do not care whether I ever see him again! I am growing desperate. God knows it is not my fault! Grey Meredith has no power over me, save the influence of a friend; but if ever man have, if ever temptation

be too strong for me, it would be your fault!"

She paused. Then in a quieter tone she added: "Make what excuse you like; go if you are going. I cannot. In any case to-day was too much for me; you have made it impossible. Simply I *cannot*," she repeated. "Leave me."

He looked at her, laid his finger on her pulse; then he said curtly: "Very well; go to bed, and as the children are told, 'sleep for more sense.'"

As he went he heard her lock the door after him.

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